

Robin, the Boy of Steel Elseworlds

by Syl

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Summary: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Robin?

1. (Part 1)

Author: Syl Francis Email: efrancis@earthlink.net Title: Robin, the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] Rating: PG Part 1

Summary: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...Robin?! Part One contains the Prologue and Chapters 1-5. The last son of Krypton is found and adopted by a young circus couple, the Flying Graysons. After they're dead in an extortion scheme, Dick Grayson goes to live with billionaire-philanthropist, Bruce Wayne. Soon, Dick discovers that his new benefactor has a deep secret. Unknown, to Wayne, he's about to find out that the reverse is also true.

Author's Note: This story idea came to me from several sources-- 1. A recent adventure in Hypertime with Superboy (One of the parallel worlds he visits has a Superboy who's been raised and trained by that world's Batman); 2. The Nightwing Secret Files in which the origin of his codename is finally revealed; 3. The Kandorian Nightwing, Van Zee (who was the pre-Crisis' Superman's first cousin and look-alike); 4. A recent "lost tale" of the Crisis which introduced a Batman and Robin from a parallel Earth who are also father and son; 5. And finally, the Elseworlds tale, Speeding Bullets in which Kal-El is raised by Martha and Thomas Wayne. While none of these sources is in fact directly related to my story, each in its own way somehow helped inspire it. Disclaimer: All the characters are owned by DC Comics and Time/Warner; this is an original story that does not intend to infringe on their copyright.

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Robin: the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] By Syl Francis

Prologue

"You are my last hope, Jor."

"Cousin, you heard the Council. No one may leave Krypton during these uncertain times."

"But little Van. He is all I have." The elder Van-Zee looked pleadingly at his cousin, Jor-El. "His mother, my wife, has been dead these past two weeks. She was too weak to withstand the stress of childbirth during Krypton's death throes."

"Death throes?" Jor-El scoffed. "Cousin, you exaggerate."

"Jor, you and I both studied the geological readings. Krypton's inner core, which we have exploited shamelessly for our power needs for untold generations, is nearing overload limits." Van-Zee studied his cousin. "The planet is going to explode."

"He's right, my husband." Both men turned at Lara's voice. She walked over to Van-Zee where he stood holding the baby. She held her arms out for the child, smiling with pain-filled eyes.

"He looks so much like Kal did at this age, Jor." Lara looked sadly upon her husband. "Our little Kal would've seen one complete sun cycle the day Van-too was born."

"Lara--" Jor-El began.

"No, Jor! Don't say it! The quakes killed our son. *Krypton* killed our son. I hate this planet, my husband. It is dying, and it is taking our people with it. *My* son is already dead. Little Van's poor mother is also dead." She leaned down and kissed the sleeping baby. "Don't let Krypton kill our godchild, too. Please, Jor...help our kinsman save his son."

Jor-El nodded. "Very well."

At that that moment, Jor-El's lab was rocked with a violent quake, lasting longer than any previous. The adults ran desperately for cover, Lara still holding the baby. She looked up in horror as a skylight and two support beams fell towards her and the baby. At the last moment, Van Zee pushed them under a lab table and out of harms way, as the heavy beams and shards of glass rained down on him. Huddling under the table, Lara managed to hold on to little Van.

Seeing her kinsman's lifeless body under the heavy rubble, she screamed. "*Van*!" Jor-El reached for her. "Jor! We must help him!"

"We can't!" Jor-El shouted. "We must take cover! The baby--hurry!"

When the nightmarish, planet-shaking quakes finally ended, there was

little left of the proud, gleaming laboratory complex. Jor-El picked his way slowly through the unstable, debris-laden floor.

Finally, Jor-El spotted him, under a pile of rubble and shards of glass: Van- Zee. Jor-El checked his cousin's pulse. There was none. Van-Zee was dead. Jor-El bowed his head momentarily in a silent prayer to Rao.

"I promise, cousin," he whispered fervently, "that your son and my godchild, the last scion of the Houses of Zee and El, will live to see his first sun cycle. This I swear."

"Lara! It's time! Bring little Van. The starship is ready for launch."

"I'm coming," Lara said. She was carrying the child, wrapped in bright red, blue, and yellow blankets. She hesitated when she saw the small starship. "Are we doing the right thing, my husband?" she asked tentatively.

Jor-El walked up to her and took her and the baby in his arms. They'd both grown extremely fond of the child in the weeks following the quakes as they prepared the ship for the long voyage. Van-too reminded them so much of their own Kal-- same hair and eye color, same happy disposition.

"Yes, my wife," Jor-El said softly. "The little one will have a chance to grow up, perhaps fall in love, and have children. More importantly, he will survive."

Lara nodded through her tears. Jor-El took the baby gently and tenderly placed him in the tiny vessel's cradle. Placing his hand on the child's forehead, he breathed a short prayer.

"May Rao keep you safe on your journey, little one. Our love and the love of your parents go with you." Jor-El and Lara looked down on the smiling baby boy, both in tears. Remembering what she was holding, Lara turned to her husband.

"Jor, I almost forgot," she said, "I found this amongst Van-Zee's effects. It was marked, 'For my son,' so I brought it." Jor-El nodded. He took the small, black sphere, an ordinary recording device, which he noted was stamped with the midnight blue crest of the House of Zee, and placed it carefully in a recessed storage bin inside the ship's tiny cabin.

They looked down at the now sleeping baby once more, reluctant to let go of the moment.

Suddenly, Krypton began shaking again. This time, the quakes were even more powerful than before. Screams from outside, thunderous rumblings, and explosions warned Jor-El and Lara that perhaps this was it.

Lara leaned down hurriedly and kissed the baby one last time. Jor-El pressed a control panel to seal the hatch. Lara's eyes were streaming tears. The lab began to shake violently. Glass vials fell off their shelves. Various pieces of equipment vibrated off the tables. The

windows rattled from the explosions and sonic booms.

Jor-El brought the starship's systems on line. He checked life support, command and control, and navigation. Jor-El double-checked the coordinates for the astro-nav course. Satisfied, he brought the star drive on line.

As his wife joined him, Jor-El punched the 'Activate' button, and the tiny starship, carrying its precious bundle slowly rose. The two doomed Kryptonians watched as the ship cleared the broken skylights and disappeared into the night sky.

When the ship cleared Krypton's star system, its sensors recorded a spatial anomaly caused by one of the planets disintegrating in a multi-megaton explosion...

Chapter One

The large motor home, pulling a smaller trailer, drove past the miles of newly planted wheat and cornfields. To Mary's delight they passed a field of sunflowers with faces turned west towards the low, setting sun. The western sky was ablaze with russets, lavenders, and deep purples.

It was a beautiful, clear March day, the first day of spring, and Mother Nature was in her full panoramic glory of bright, rainbow colors.

"Oh, Johnny, I never knew Kansas could be so beautiful. So many wildflowers. It's like driving through a garden."

"Hey, can I show a girl a good time or what?" Johnny teased. "Didn't I promise you travel to exotic places, fancy clothes, and meeting interesting people."

Mary laughed. "I never thought of Kansas as exotic, but I have to admit that before I met you, I'd never had such fancy clothes as my costumes, and as for interesting people..."

As Johnny and Mary drove past the solitary farmhouses, green wheat fields sparkling with evening dew, and lengthening shadows. Anyone who happened to look up as they passed, saw the painted, 'Flying Graysons' banner, with the picture of a trapeze and two circus aerialists in mid-flight.

Laughing happily, John and Mary Grayson traveled west. They were going to meet up with the Haly Circus in Wichita, Kansas. A sign reading 'Welcome to Smallville, Home of the Fighting Farmers! 15 miles ahead!' greeted them.

"Now, that's what I call an exotic locale," Mary said. "'Smallville, Home of the Fighting Farmers.'" They shared a companionable laugh.

It was nice to laugh again. They'd wanted children so badly and had been so excited when Mary first discovered that she was pregnant. She was due March 21st. A momentary stab of pain pierced her heart. The baby would've been born today. She felt the darkness begin to descend

again, but determinedly pushed it aside.

Johnny had been so loving, so understanding. It had been his baby, too. The loss had devastated the both of them. The doctor's additional news almost destroyed her. Mary would never have children. She looked over at her husband of two years and felt her heart fill with tenderness.

"I love you, Johnny Grayson," she whispered. John smiled sideways, his gray eyes gentle.

"I'm the luckiest guy in the world, Mary," he said. "The most beautiful girl I know is sitting next to me right now and wearing my ring. What more could I ever ask for?"

He held his hand out to her. Smiling through tears that just seemed to come of their own accord, Mary reached hers out to him.

A sudden piercing whistle, accompanied by a loud ~*Ka-boo-ooo-oo-mmmm*!~ exploded over their heads. Startled, John lost control of the wheel and the motor home began careening crazily back and forth across the road.

Hanging on for dear life, Mary screamed. A small pinprick of light appeared above them among the fluffy, plum-pink clouds. The light grew brighter, hotter, leaving a burning trail behind it; the whistle increased to an eardrum-shattering roar. John finally brought the motor home under control and brought it to complete stop on the side of the road.

Both gasped in momentary relief.

The hot trail of burning light rocketed past them and crashed into the adjoining field in a shower of molten rock and burning debris. At last, the early Kansas evening grew still.

"What was *that*?" John whispered, awed. They jumped out of the motor home's cab and ran towards the field. In the deepening gloom, they could see a large trail of scorched earth left by 'whatever' that fell from the sky. At the far end of the black scar, they could see a fire burning raggedly.

John started running towards it. "Johnny! What are you doing?" Mary cried.

"It could be a plane or something," he called back. "There could be people trapped inside."

Mary ran after him, stumbling on the newly torn earth. She heard John cry out up ahead. Frightened, she began to run harder, falling every few steps on the uneven ground.

"Mary! You won't believe this!" John called. Mary ran to what appeared to be the lip of a crater formed by the force of the impact. She stopped, her breath caught in her throat.

Inside the crater was a small craft of some type, possibly military. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen, except in science fiction magazines. John was walking around down there, avoiding the hot spots.

"Johnny, be careful," she called. In the quiet of the early evening, Mary heard a small sound, almost like that of a cat meowing. She looked around uncertainly. Where was it coming from? Finally, she turned back to the small craft. Johnny was touching it gingerly.

He took off his jacket, and wrapping it around his hands, he began feeling around the craft's sides.

"Oh, Johnny, please--"

Suddenly, a small hatch began to open.

"Johnny...!" Mary gasped. A half-formulated scream died in her throat. Both stood in mute silence for several seconds. A baby, little more than a newborn, lay inside crying heartbrokenly.

John reached tentatively inside. As soon as he held the small, wet and hungry bundle, the cries ceased. The baby looked up at John with bright blue eyes. Suddenly, the baby yawned widely and fell promptly asleep...

Later, they were sitting in the living quarters of the motor home, overcome with wonderment as they bathed and changed the baby boy.

The strange craft was stored in their equipment trailer. After John dug it out of the rich Kansas soil, he discovered that it was surprisingly light. It proved relatively easy to drag back to the trailer.

Mary rummaged for the baby items that she hadn't had the heart to dispose of so shortly after her miscarriage. Among the miniature doll-sized t-shirts, socks, and booties, she found a baby bottle. John took it from her, and in lieu of baby formula, warmed a bottle of whole milk in the small microwave.

When the milk was ready, John brought her the warmed bottle. With a nervous smile, Mary took it, and hesitantly, brought the nipple to the baby's mouth.

Happily, the baby knew what to do and within minutes, he was gurgling away as if he hadn't eaten in weeks. John observed the proceedings, his heart filling.

"I guess we'll have to stop in Smallville and buy some formula," he suggested. Mary glanced at him, her eyes shining.

"Oh, Johnny...he's so beautiful!" she breathed in awe. "So perfect."

"Mary," John whispered, "I don't understand. Who would put a baby in a--a-- whatever that thing is? Risk his life like that?"

"I don't know, Johnny," she whispered back, her eyes never leaving the small miracle that she held in her arms.

John sat down next to her on their tiny pull-down couch. He held Mary

and the baby close to him.

"Mary, this baby belongs to somebody. What if whoever he belongs to lost him and is even now looking for him?"

As her husband's words sunk in, Mary turned frightened eyes first to John and then to the baby.

"If he belonged to me," John added cautiously, "and *I'd* lost him, I know that I'd be doing everything in my power to--"

--To make him *un*-lost?" Mary finished, her voice catching. John nodded. They both looked down at the now contentedly sleeping baby, and then at each other. Without another word, they both knew that they would never give the baby up, nor would they ever tell anyone how they'd found him.

God might have closed a door on their lives when He took their unborn child, but in His wisdom, he'd just opened a window. This was their child, delivered to them by a great cosmic stork on the first day of spring, just as promised.

The Flying Graysons had just become a family...

In the end, it proved easier than even they'd imagined. Pop Haly was the only one in whom John confided about Mary's miscarriage, and because Pop respected the Graysons' privacy, he hadn't informed any of the other performers.

When they arrived in Wichita, everyone greeted the new baby as member of the family.

"What will you call him?" the Great Marko asked.

"Oh, he's so beautiful!" Bobo, the clown, exclaimed.

"Why, he's the spitting image of Mary!" Maggie, the Tattooed Lady, proclaimed. "Look at those blue eyes!"

"Hey, Johnny, you lucky son of a gun!" one of the roustabouts called. "A son to carry on the Flying Graysons tradition!"

John and Mary smiled at the welcoming throng of their fellow circus performers and friends. This was their family and little Dicky--Richard John Grayson, named for John's father--was even now being embraced into the fold...

Later that evening, Pop looked down at the tiny sleeping bundle in his arms. He emphatically shook his head, 'no.'

"Johnny, you know that'd I give my right arm for you, but this--?" He shrugged helplessly. The baby yawned in his sleep and slowly opened his eyes. Pop stood mesmerized by the amazing blue eyes that gazed calmly up at him. A little hand reached up and formed a tiny fist next to a damask cheek.

John and Mary held their breaths. At last, Mary spoke tentatively. "Look, Dicky, your godfather is holding you for the first time."

Pop looked at them, eyes wide. "Godfather?" he asked. At their nods, he quickly glanced down at the small form again. Dicky gurgled happily, waving his arms and kicking slightly in his godfather's arms. It almost seemed as if he were happy at the news.

Pop smiled down at the baby, gently touching his diminutive nose. A baby hand grabbed Pop's finger and refused to let go.

"You've sure got a strong grip there, youngster. You're a Grayson, all right. Yep, like Maggie said, you're the spitting image of your mother." This last was addressed at John and Mary. Excitedly, the young couple hugged and kissed. Pop Haly would keep their secret.

"You'll need papers, proof that Dicky's really yours," he said. He noted the Graysons' surprised looks. Obviously, neither had given the matter much thought. Smiling, he added with a reassurance that he didn't feel, "Don't worry. I know someone who might help." He looked down once more at the happy, gurgling baby.

"I'll take of everything. You're family now, Dicky, and the Haly Circus always takes care of its own..."

"*No*!" Pop screamed, livid. "No money, you leech! No more!" The door to his motor home was suddenly yanked open. Dick ducked underneath the back stoop. He'd come to Pop's trailer to ask if he could ride Elinore in the matinee parade today.

A man was literally thrown out of the trailer. "Get out, Zucco! I told you a month ago that you'd get no more money from me. We're through! If you don't leave the circus grounds right now, I'll call the cops."

"Oh, yeah? And then what?" Zucco sneered. "*You* gonna tell 'em about a little piece of paper I had forged for you almost nine years ago? No, Haly. I'm warning *you*--either pay up, or someone's gonna get hurt."

Haly made a threatening move, and Zucco broke into a stumbling run. "And don't come back, you bloodsucker!" Pop yelled, waving his fist. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Dick. His eyes widened. How much had the boy heard?

"Dicky, what are *you* doing here, son? It's almost time for the opening parade." Dick looked up wordlessly at his godfather. He'd almost forgotten why he'd come. Unable to speak, he was relieved when Pop smiled suddenly, his eyes taking on their normal twinkle. "And aren't you supposed to ride Elinore today?"

Dick broke into a wide grin. "Oh, boy! D'you mean it, Pop? Honest?"

"Why, you and Elinore are the stars of the show, Dicky! Of course, you'll lead the parade."

Dick jumped up in jubilation. He began running towards the Graysons'

motor home, calling over his shoulder, "Oh, boy! Wait'll I tell Mom and Dad!"

Smiling, Haly waved at the exuberant boy. As Dick disappeared among the long line of performers' motor homes, a worried expression overtook his countenance. Doing business with Zucco all those years ago had been a mistake. A very bad mistake. Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders.

"Oh well, the show must go on," he said philosophically.

Pop stepped back inside his trailer. Today's receipts were unbelievable. Gotham City's Wayne Foundation was sponsoring the special performance this evening. The Wayne Foundation was matching the gate receipts with a donation for the Gotham City Children's Hospital. They had a sold out house.

The nice thing was that the Haly Circus did not have to donate any of its earnings to the charity. The circus hadn't exactly operated in the black these past few years, even with Dick as the star performer, and Pop couldn't afford to give away any money that it made.

All Bruce Wayne had requested was that the show be touted for charity and he would personally foot the donation.

"Odd man," Pop mused. He began to dress in his Ring Master's togs. Tonight's performance was still several hours away, but they had an afternoon matinee in less than an hour. He smiled suddenly reflecting on the past few years...

Eleven-month-old Dick literally learning to walk on the high wire while the other performers gasped in fear 70 feet below. With John waiting, arms held out, Mary released the baby. Without hesitation, Dick walked out to his father...

Three-year-old Dick taking his first somersault on the trapeze, his father catching him...

Four-year-old Dick performing his first triple, wowing the crowds below...

Six-year-old Dick, one of only three aerialists in the world, performing the perilous "Death Drop!"--a quadruple somersault--without a net...

And now, nine-year-old Dick Grayson was working on perfecting what others said was the impossible, a quintuple somersault. And if Pop knew his godchild, Dick was just the aerialist who'd defy the laws of gravity and accomplish this feat.

"I *love* my job!" Pop said proudly. Then remembering Zucco's threats, he sighed. There was little he could do at the moment. "I'll talk to John and Mary tomorrow," he promised himself. He'd have a better idea about what to do once he'd had a chance to sleep on it.

Unfortunately, tomorrow would prove too late.

"John!"

"Mary!"

"Mom! Dad!" Dick yelled, horrified. "*No-ooo-oo*...!"

"Does he have any relatives?"

"No, no one, poor kid."

"Pop's his godfather. He wants the boy to stay with him."

"I heard Child Welfare Services won't let him. Something about an iterant circus not being a fit place to raise a kid."

"Poor Dicky. What'll become of him? He's only nine..."

Chapter Two

Dick sat quietly through the entire ordeal--the juvenile detention center, family court, the funeral, and now the long drive to his new home. The gray, misty day reflected his mood.

He was in the backseat, next to Bruce Wayne. They were dressed identically in dark suits, dark ties, and white Oxford shirts. Dick leaned his forehead on the window. He didn't see the dismal, wooded hills of Gotham Heights. The blazing fall colors were muted in mourning browns and grays today.

His parents' fall played over and over in his mind.

"Why?" he whispered.

"I don't know, Dick," Bruce said. Dick didn't know that he'd spoken out loud.

He wiped his face on his sleeve, ashamed that once again he was showing such weakness in front of his new guardian, a relative stranger. He still didn't understand why Bruce wanted him to come live at his house, but he didn't want to do anything that would make his parents ashamed of him.

He looked down at his lap, his hands clasping and unclasping. He sniffed, his nose runny, a tear trickling down his cheek.

"Here, chum," Bruce said, handing Dick a handkerchief. Dick nodded his thanks, unable to answer. His breath came faster in short gasps; his eyes wouldn't stop crying. He covered his face in the handkerchief.

At last Dick felt a pair of strong arms pulling him close. The kind gesture was too much for the brokenhearted boy. Overcome with grief, Dick buried his face in his new guardian's chest. He sobbed quietly, his body wracked by emotion.

Exhausted, Dick fell asleep on Bruce's lap.

A loud clap of thunder woke him. A momentary wave of panic swept through him. Where was he?

"Mom?" he called. Then he remembered. His mom would never answer him again. His dad would never catch him. He had no one left. No family. No circus. No one.

He thought about his mysterious benefactor, Bruce Wayne. Each time he looked into Bruce's eyes, a cold fist seemed to suddenly squeeze his stomach. And yet, there was *something* about Bruce that made Dick want to trust him openly and without hesitation.

As he sat up in the dark, he had a sudden yearning to find his guardian. But he'd only been inside Wayne Manor once before and he hadn't had a chance to learn his way around. Dick stared down at the floor while concentrating on the layout of the mansion below and the rooms he'd actually visited. He formed a mental picture of Bruce and tried to trace the route to these rooms from his bedroom.

As he concentrated, Dick could suddenly *see* Bruce, or rather, a dark, forbidding figure, sitting in a frightening place of deep shadows. He was surrounded by a lot of strange equipment that Dick couldn't recognize.

As he sat confused, Dick realized that his room seemed to disappear around him, while the room in which he thought he'd seen Bruce materialized.

He blinked. His room reappeared.

"Whoa, you're losing it, Grayson," he muttered. He lay back down, thinking about what had just happened. Was his strange ability growing stronger? He'd never experienced 'it' quite so strongly before. As he stared up at the ceiling, he thought about the 'room' where he'd seen Bruce. "That wasn't a room. That was a *cave* or something."

He shook his head.

"You didn't see anything," he denied. "You promised Mom and Dad, remember?" As he dropped off to sleep, he kept repeating to himself, "You promised to stop..."

Dick sat at the kitchen table wordlessly watching Alfred as the dignified butler prepared breakfast. Dick felt uncomfortable. Everyone in his family had pitched in with household chores. He and Dad helped Mom in the motor home's tiny kitchen with chopping vegetables and setting the table. Afterwards, while Dad washed dishes, Dick rinsed and dried...

"The Flying Graysons are a team as well as a family, Dicky," Dad used to say. "Everything we do, we do together..."

Dick again felt the stinging in the back of his eyes. Blinking rapidly, he cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, sir," he said tentatively.

"You may address me as 'Alfred,' Master Dick." Alfred's eyes smiled gently. "How may I be of assistance?"

"Can I help?"

Alfred quirked an eyebrow. "*Help*, young sir?"

"Uh-huh," Dick said nodding.

Alfred's smile broadened. "Of course, Master Dick. Here, why don't you step around this way?" Alfred indicated that Dick come around the kitchen island where he was currently working, behind the stove.

Dick eagerly jumped up and joined the kindly gentleman. His eyes barely cleared the counter.

"Well, now, a chef trainee must be able to see what he's preparing," Alfred said, rummaging inside the large, built-in pantry. "This should do the trick!" he exclaimed.

He pulled out a small stepladder and set it front of Dick. Dick quickly stepped up.

"Now, young sir," Alfred began. "To prepare breakfast 'Ala Pennyworth,' one must become *one* with the egg."

Dick looked blank. "Huh?"

"Watch and learn!" Alfred said, smiling. With an elaborate wave of the hands, Alfred both charmed and delighted his newest charge on the secrets of culinary magic.

"Where's Mr. Wayne?" Dick asked, whisking the eggs as Alfred had shown him. Shaking his head, he amended, "Uhhh, I mean, Bruce?"

Dick was having difficulty remembering to call his guardian by his first name. His parents raised him to be respectful of his elders, so he couldn't bring himself to call either Bruce or Alfred by their first names, yet.

"I'm afraid that Master Bruce is still asleep. He had a rather long night of it, I believe."

Dick looked at Alfred with wide blue eyes.

"But it's almost eight o'clock in the morning!" he exclaimed in shock. At home, the Flying Graysons would've been up already for almost three hours and halfway through their morning training routine.

"You'll learn that Master Bruce keeps his own hours," Alfred explained.

Dick reflected on how different things were going to be. Is that what being wealthy meant, he wondered? Sleeping past eight and maybe even later?

"Breakfast is almost ready, Master Dick," Alfred said. "Please wash up and take a seat at the table."

Dick nodded, doing as told and sitting down. Everything smelled and looked delicious.

Alfred set a plate of chocolate chip pancakes with a side of bacon and eggs in front of Dick. To this feast, he added a tall glass of milk, orange juice, a small pitcher of syrup, softened butter, and other condiments.

"Here you go, young sir," Alfred proclaimed cheerily. "Just the breakfast to energize a growing boy." He smiled down at his young charge, and turned back to the kitchen area.

"Aren't **you** going to eat, too?" Dick asked.

"I ate hours ago, Master Dick," Alfred said. "If you'll excuse me, I must prepare Master Bruce's breakfast."

"Oh," Dick said, looking down disappointedly. Alfred gazed at the boy for a moment. Reaching a decision, he set down the whisk with which he was about to beat the eggs, walked around the island to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

"But I suppose since the Master is still abed, there's no need to hurry," he said. "Now, tell me a bit about yourself, Master Dick. What's it like for a boy growing up in the circus? It must be terribly wonderful."

Dick nodded excitedly and proceeded to fill Alfred in on the wonders of circus life...

"I thought I heard laughter."

Dick and Alfred looked up. Standing at the kitchen door was a freshly shaven and casually dressed Bruce Wayne. Dick noted the tired lines around his guardian's eyes, and narrowing his own eyes, saw what looked like a discoloration around one cheek, like a bruise.

How'd he get **that**? Dick wondered. Did he get into a fight last night? Again, he wondered what kind of man his new guardian would prove to be.

"Master Bruce!" Alfred cried out in mortification. He jumped up and hurried to the kitchen area, banging pots and pans. "My apologies, sir! The young master and I were chatting and I simply forgot the time!"

Bruce waved his hand in a staying motion. "That's okay, Alfred. I needed to get up anyway. So, what's for breakfast?" He looked at Dick's nearly empty plate and gave the boy a half-smile. "Chocolate chip pancakes? Hey, I'm in," he said, pulling out a chair.

"They're great, Bruce! I've already had a zillion of 'em," Dick said.

"Indeed, Master Bruce," Alfred said drolly. "I don't believe I've

ever come across anyone with such a voracious appetite. Young Master Dick has already had four servings!"

Bruce turned an amused glance at Dick. Sizing up the small boy, he teased, "Where do you put it?"

Dick grinned, slightly embarrassed. It was funny because he never felt hungry, but once he sat down to a meal, he couldn't seem to get enough to eat. It was a source of constant amusement for his mom.

"Mom always used to say that the Flying Graysons had to work extra hard 'cause otherwise they wouldn't be able to afford to feed me."

Bruce leaned in closely and spoke in mock conspiratorially low tones. "Between you'n me, kid, your appetite is going to make Alfred extremely happy."

Later that day, Dick wandered the vast manor. Bruce had long since left for an appointment with Lucius Fox, and Alfred was off somewhere, attending to household chores. Dick looked around the large study, a gloomy room lined with bookshelves. He walked up to the oversized windows and drew open the heavy drapes.

The mid-afternoon sun instantly flooded the room. A bright sunbeam fell on a giant wedding portrait of a young man and woman hanging over the fireplace. The man looked a lot like Bruce but with a mustache. The woman was breathtakingly beautiful in her long, white gown.

Dick looked away. Alfred told him that Bruce's parents died when he'd been a little boy, too.

"I guess we have a lot in common."

Spotting a grandfather clock along one wall, Dick noticed that it wasn't working. Studying it, a sudden idea came to him. Dick was unusually gifted with mechanical objects. Somehow he always just **knew** how things worked.

Truth be told, Dick knew that if he concentrated sufficiently on any given object, eventually he'd be able to **see** its internal mechanism and know instantly how to fix the problem.

Dick didn't know **how** he could. He just **knew** that he could. His mom and dad would look at each other worriedly and pretend they didn't notice. One time he overheard his parents talking about him. To this day, Dick didn't understand what Mom meant when she'd said, "Perhaps it's common with his kind?"

Or Dad's cryptic response, "We'll have to start taking it easy, Mary. Maybe not have Dicky master the quintuple loop. Most everyone takes his talent and amazing gifts in stride, but one day...I don't know. I just don't want a lot of publicity."

Mom had laughed suddenly. "A circus performer who **doesn't** want publicity? Now if **that** got out, people would **really** talk...!"

Dick smiled at the memory, but then thoughtfully reflected on his mother's words.

"What did she mean?'" he wondered for the umpteenth time. "What *about* 'my kind'? Isn't *my* kind, *Dad's* kind, or *Mom's* kind?"

He shook his head, not understanding. He'd never questioned his parents because Dad had told him that eavesdropping on other people's conversation was wrong. So, he'd been left to wonder...

Walking up to the clock, Dick tentatively opened the clock face. Checking his watch, he stood on tiptoe and reached up for the clock hands. He tried to move the big hand. Nothing happened. It wouldn't move clockwise.

"That's funny," he muttered. "It's stuck." Not wanting to risk breaking it, he tried moving it counter-clockwise. To his surprise, the clock hand began moving. However, as soon as the big hand passed the nine, it stopped, refusing to go further.

"Great! I broke it," he said in self-disgust. Placing both hands on his hips, he glared at the offending clock face. As he stared, he suddenly *saw* the problem. Inside the clock face there were two small devices set up as 'stops.' The big hand *couldn't* move beyond the 'two' and the 'nine.'

"That's weird," he said. Taking a chance, he moved the clock hand back to the 'two.' As soon as he did so, he heard a *click*. Startled, Dick glanced to the right. A narrow door stood open inside a dark recess along the wall.

"Whoa," Dick breathed. "A secret passage. How *cool*!" Taking a moment to assess whether this was a good idea or not, his sense of adventure won over. As soon as he stepped through, the door closed behind him. His heart leaped into his throat.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all," he muttered. Leaning against the dank wall, he allowed his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark. Concentrating with all his might, he tried to *see* through the gloom. As always, whenever he *wanted* his strange ability to work, it stubbornly refused.

Sighing, Dick took a tentative step forward. His foot touched empty space. Carefully feeling with his toes, he finally *felt* a solid step about five inches below him. A staircase! He was on a staircase. Satisfied that he wouldn't fall and break his neck, he began climbing down in the nearly impenetrable darkness.

"'Curiouser and curiouser,'" he said, quoting his mom. She'd read Alice in Wonderland to him innumerable times, and even though the story was about a *girl*, he'd enjoyed it as much as she.

Reaching the bottom, he was startled again, this time by muted lights coming suddenly to life. As he looked around, Dick realized that his half-forgotten 'dream' from last night had been real.

A large bat fluttered overhead, disappearing into the blackness

above. Dick ducked momentarily frightened, his heart in his throat.

Straightening slowly, Dick looked around with open-mouthed awe. He was standing in the middle of a large cave, surrounded by vast amounts of strange electronic equipment and what looked like a scientific laboratory. As he walked around the vast underground cavern, his movement probably set off a motion detector. A spotlight came on abruptly.

Dick's jaw dropped: the Batmobile!

Chapter Three

Tony Zucco's sneering countenance glared down at him from a half-dozen computer monitors. Bruce raised a single eyebrow.

"Bad enough the kid finds the cave so soon after arriving," he muttered, chagrinned, "but he obviously knows his way around computers as well. He's cracked every built-in security program in the system."

Bruce checked the information that Dick had accessed. His jaw line hardened, the only indication that what he'd read disturbed him. He strode to the uniform vault.

"Sir?" Alfred spoke from behind him. "What are you going to do?"

"Go after him," Batman said, moving purposefully towards the Batmobile. "And pray I'm not too late." He uttered this last as he slammed the driver's side door and roared away.

Dick easily climbed over the high stonewall surrounding the vast estate, thankful for the growing shadows. The computer search showed that Zucco was related to a local crime lord, Mario Falcone. In the past, Falcone had kept Zucco from the reach of the law through his vast network of crooked lawyers.

It was possible that Falcone might be hiding Zucco until the heat wore off.

As he made his way stealthily, Dick thought about how **simple** it had been for him to access the computers he'd discovered in the giant cave. Funny, the only computer he'd ever seen before in his entire life was the one that Pop kept to do his books. Dick had watched him work on it a few times, but had never used it himself. Yet, when he came across all of the security measures on the computer banks in the cave, he'd just **known** what to do.

Really weird.

As for a means of getting to the Falcone estate, Dick simply looked up the bus and subway schedules. He then hitched a ride to town, took the subway all the way to the nearest suburb, and then caught the bus. It dropped him off less than a mile from the entrance to the

estate.

Dick spotted a large tree a short distance away from the wall. Expertly sizing the span, he leaped from a crouching position and reached the topmost limb.

Swinging up and over, Dick hid among the darker gloom afforded by the branches and waited.

Batman drove like a maniac. The Falcone estate was clear on the other side of Gotham City, located along the steep banks of the Gotham River.

"The better to dispose of the remains," Batman growled sarcastically. He was referring to three unidentified nude bodies discovered along the sheer banks of the Gotham River in the past thirty years. None of the cases had ever been solved. None of the men had ever been identified.

Of course, when the body's fingertips have been cut off and most of the teeth pulled, identification becomes problematic. The FBI suspected the Falcone organization, but there was no direct evidence to link them.

Batman tore through the city streets at speeds that earned him shocked looks and pointed fingers.

"Gordon's not going to like this," he muttered. But there was no helping it. The long-planned for bypass around the city had been stalled for several months due to cost overruns and contract disputes. Falcone Construction, Inc. had low-bid Wayne Enterprises and won the contract for the major project.

"Just another fine example of Falcone's sense of civic duty," he said.

As soon as the guard disappeared around the outbuildings, Dick climbed down from his hiding place and hurried towards the main house. Night had settled on the vast estate, which was set on a high cliff overlooking the swiftly flowing river below.

Moving silently alongside the mansion, Dick found a corner window and listened intently. Satisfied that the room was empty, he took out an interesting device that he'd picked up in the cave: a glasscutter.

He recognized it because the Haly Circus' resident magician, Kabir Balin, used one as part of his act.

Grinning, Dick thought about all of the other 'interesting' devices that he'd found there, each kept under lock and key.

Slicing through the a single windowpane, Dick put his hand through and unlocked the window from the inside. Stealthily climbing in, he quickly made his way across the room and into the adjacent hallway.

Batman leaped up, catching a solid handhold over the edge of the stonewall. Effortlessly pulling himself over, he crouched momentarily on the narrow ledge. Light spilled from only two rooms in the house.

Taking out a small pair of night vision goggles with zoom lenses, Batman zeroed in on the room located on the bottom floor. Two men occupied it. They were sitting on the sofa, drinks on the cocktail table before them, a television on.

"Soldiers," Batman surmised. Raising his glasses to the second story window, Batman trained them on the glass doors that opened onto a balcony. They were ajar.

Batman allowed himself a small grin.

"Too easy," he growled.

"Well, lookit here," the ugly voice sneered.

Dick whirled in shock. Three of Falcone's men stood over him. The one who'd spoken held a pistol trained on him. The other two were also armed, one with a military-style rifle, the other one with a shotgun.

"What d'you got, Artie?"

Dick turned to the new voice. He recognized it instantly!

"Got us a 'burglar,' Mr. Zucco," Artie answered. He waved his handgun at Dick, indicating he wanted him to move.

"Hey, it's that circus kid," Zucco exclaimed. "The Grayson kid! Good work, boys. This little creep can ID me and send me up the river." He laughed, a sudden cold laugh. "I guess it's *you* who's gonna end up *up the river*, kid!" he guffawed. "Right, Artie?"

"Yeah, right, Mr. Zucco," Artie agreed, laughing easily. Looking at Dick, he said with mock regret, "Sorry 'bout this kid, but business *is* business."

Shaking his head in wide-eyed fear, Dick abruptly stumbled back against the wall behind him.

Grinning cruelly, Artie snapped his fingers and addressed the other two men. "Rico, Gino, take the kid for a midnight cruise. And make sure that he takes a nice, extra-long swim. Got it?"

The two men nodded, also grinning.

"Got it, Artie," they said together.

Falcone sat at his desk, working on a seemingly endless pile of

paper.

"It would've been simpler to *build* the damned road on time and under cost," he growled. "That *stupido*, Tony, and his grand ideas. Now Dent and Gordon are *both* after me!"

"The problem with relatives is that you can't choose who they are."

Startled, Falcone almost fell out of chair at the sound of the cold, gravelly voice.

"What--?"

A dark shadow descended on him. Falcone initially trembled in horror at the black specter.

"I want Zucco, Falcone."

Recognition flooded Falcone's face.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You've got no right--!" That was as far he got. His sentence ended in a choking sound as Batman literally picked him up by the neck and squeezed a little too long and too hard.

"You're choking me," Falcone pleaded, barely getting the words out.

Releasing his grip, Batman deliberately dropped him in a heap.

"Talk," Batman growled. "Before I get mad." Bending down, he grabbed Falcone by the lapels and, enunciating each word clearly, added, "You--don't--want--to-- make--me--mad!"

Falcone squeaked in fear. Finding his voice, he began to talk.

Grinning evilly, Rico and Gino advanced towards Dick.

"No!" Dick cried, scooting backwards, frightened. "Stay away from me!" As Rico reached for him, Dick desperately kicked out, connecting with the gangster's knee. Rico cried out in pain.

"Why you, little--" he howled, enraged. He was hopping on the floor clutching his hurt knee. "I think you broke it, you little creep! Now you're *really* gonna pay! Get him, Gino!"

Without batting an eyelid, Gino trained the double-barreled shotgun he was holding at Dick's head.

"Make one false move, kid, and I'll blow you away right here, right now."

Paralyzed with fear, Dick stared at the gun. He felt himself begin to hyperventilate, his heart hammering. The sounds around him began to recede into the far background. The room and all its occupants faded to an indiscernible gray.

The twin barrels loomed increasingly larger before his eyes.

Dick's fear and panic mounted. He broke out in a cold sweat. This was quickly followed by a hot flash. Suddenly, inexplicably, Dick started to feel as if his eyes were burning...

As the door exploded inwardly, Gino yelled in sudden pain and dropped the shotgun.

"ARGH!!!" he yelled. "My hands! My hands!"

Dick lay huddled on the floor as if transfixed. He'd just *looked* at the shotgun...just *looked* at it!

"What did you *do* to me, you little *freak*!? Gino screamed. He was thrashing on the floor, his hands held closely to his chest, whimpering at the overwhelming pain.

A vase flew past Dick and struck the wall behind him, shattering into pieces. The impact broke his trance, and he quickly rolled out of the way of the next thing that flew in his direction, Artie!

That's when Dick saw him--Batman! He was single-handedly taking care of the three gunmen. But where was Zucco? Dick looked around the room and spotted his parents' alleged killer slipping out the patio door.

Jumping to his feet, Dick ran after him.

He heard Batman call him.

"Dick!"

Batman saw Dick run outside. He's after Zucco, the Dark Knight realized. Turning to the lone remaining felon, Batman reached back and punched his lights out.

Taking out batcuffs, he ensured that the three prisoners would be immobilized when they regained consciousness. As he did so, he noticed that one man's hands were badly burned.

"What the--?" he muttered.

Although Batman could feel Dick's time quickly running out, he couldn't in all good conscience leave a wounded man untreated. Taking out his first aid kit, Batman hastily did what he could for the injured gangster. Leaving him as comfortable as possible, Batman at last ran out after Dick.

Dick sprinted through the deep shadows. Zucco! He couldn't let him get away. He wouldn't! A bloated harvest moon had risen, casting its unearthly illumination on the manicured grounds. Dick squinted through the eerie landscape trying to catch sight of the fleeing killer.

As he ran into the wooded area that lined the sheer cliffs, Dick was unexpectedly struck from behind and knocked forward. He temporarily saw stars, but he fought against the ensuing blackness.

He could hear the rushing waters of the Gotham River roaring far below as it made its relentless way to the Atlantic Ocean.

"You're the only who can ID me, punk," Zucco was saying. "*No one* who can finger me lives long, see?" He yanked Dick to his feet by the scruff of the neck and dragged the half-conscious boy to the cliff's edge.

"You loved your old man and old lady, kid?" Zucco taunted. He crouched low, face to face with Dick, holding him dangerously near the edge. "Then I'm gonna do you a favor. I'm gonna help you *join* them!"

Zucco laughed suddenly as if he'd just remembered a joke.

"But before I do that, I'm gonna tell you a little secret, circus boy. Your dear departed mother and father weren't your *real* parents." Dick blinked at him in clear incomprehension.

"That's right, kid. The Graysons weren't your parents. They *found* you, you hear me? Haly got me to forge a Kansas birth certificate for you." Seeing Dick's shocked look, he added, "Yeah, that's right, you little punk! You were never even their kid. So you see, you didn't lose anything when they died, 'cause they were never yours to lose!"

"No, you're a liar!" Dick denied hotly. "They were my *real* mom and dad. They *were*!"

"If I'm lying, kid," Zucco jeered, "then how would I know that you was 'born' on March twenty-first in some two-bit Kansas town called Smallville? How would I know *that*?"

"You could've asked anybody...Everybody in the circus knows where I was born," Dick replied.

Zucco grinned. "A wise kid, eh?" he asked. "Okay, have it your way. *Don't* believe me!" Holding the desperately struggling boy over the edge, he added, "You can *ask* them yourself! You call yourself a *Flying Grayson*?" Zucco mocked. "Then *fly*, little birdy...!"

Chapter Four

Batman saw Zucco throw Dick over the edge and take off down a narrow path. Racing to the cliff's edge, Batman took a running leap and dove into the dizzying blackness below. He had mere moments to act.

As he plummeted, Batman coolly took out a grappling gun, while he adjusted his night vision goggles. He spotted the wildly tumbling boy several feet below him. Taking aim, Batman fired a grappling hook.

"One thousand one...one thousand two..." he muttered, counting the seconds. "Dick! Look up, son!"

With growing apprehension, Batman watched tensely as the boy attempted to right himself and grab the safety line. Batman felt an instant's panic when it **appeared** that the line was going to overshoot the boy by a good ten feet.

At the last moment, Dick twisted, turned and somehow flipped himself in midair in the direction of the grapple. As the boy moved towards the safety-line, Batman saw a small hand reach out and successfully grasp it.

Trusting Dick's training to ensure that he was all right, Batman fired off a second grappling hook. It wrapped itself round a solid rock outcropping on the cliff's edge. Relieved, Batman looked down at Dick.

Dick was looking up and waving weakly. From his vantage point above him, Batman could see the boy's broad grin. He nodded back...

They were back home, seated at the kitchen table. Alfred was puttering around the kitchen island, preparing cold sandwiches and his special tomato basil soup.

"So talk," Bruce said, taking a sip of his hot cocoa.

"Master Bruce," Alfred quietly chastised, "this isn't an interrogation, sir." Bruce looked slightly abashed.

"Sorry, Dick," he apologized. "Are you ready to tell me what happened?"

Dick glanced furtively at Alfred, and then stared at Bruce. A look of fear flitted across his blue eyes. Looking down, he shook his head, 'no.'

"I'm not supposed to tell," he whispered.

"Dick, I want to help," Bruce encouraged. "I promise you that nothing you say will leave this room. You have my word."

Dick hesitated, looking askance at Alfred. Noticing, Bruce reassured him. "Dick, whatever you have to say, you can say in front of both me **and** Alfred."

Averting his eyes, Dick put his mug down and looked intently into its rapidly cooling contents. Slowly raising his dark head, he gazed solemnly at Bruce.

"I can see through things." Dick's voice was so low that Bruce had to lean forward to hear him.

"See through things?"

Dick nodded, eyes cast down.

"What do you mean?" Bruce asked. "**Literally** see through objects?"

"Uh-huh."

Keeping their faces free of expression, Bruce and Alfred exchanged neutral looks. "Can you control this ability at will?"

Dick shook his head. "Uh-uh." Then, shrugging, he amended cautiously, "Sometimes..."

He remembered how he somehow *made* it work with the grandfather clock. Feeling an automatic stab of guilt for breaking his promise to his parents, he determinedly squashed the memory, refusing to acknowledge it either to himself or Bruce. Instead, he shrugged again.

Bruce raised a single eyebrow. "Explain."

Dick hunched over in his chair and stared intently at the floor, studying the kitchen tile. "I don't know. It just happens..."

"And sometimes--?" Bruce asked leadingly.

Dick sighed, not answering for a while. Finally, in a soft whisper, he tentatively replied.

"Sometimes, when I *really* need it--I don't know--it *turns* on." He wasn't *really* telling a lie, he said to himself. After all, he didn't really know how he'd made it work with the clock.

"How long have you had this ability?" Bruce asked.

Again Dick shrugged.

"I'm not sure. I remember when I was just a little kid, Mom lost one of her earrings. I told her it was underneath the motor home, stuck behind one of the tires." Dick took a sip from his now-cold cocoa.

"When she found it, she..." Dick turned away as if in shame and then added in a low voice, "She got kinda mad at me. Told me I shouldn't get into her jewelry without permission."

When he looked up again, Bruce could see the distress in Dick's face over the accusation. The boy's voice broke.

"I told her I hadn't touched it, but when she asked me how I knew where it was..." Dick swallowed, wiping a tear that had started to fall. "She didn't believe me." He paused, upset. "Even Dad didn't believe me."

By now Dick was scrunched on his chair, his knees up to his chin. He spoke this last into his knees; his eyes squeezed shut. He sniffed softly and looked up, blue eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I got scared. I thought that maybe I was crazy or something."

"What did you do then?" Bruce asked.

"At first, I told myself that it was all my imagination, that normal people couldn't see through walls, that if I told anybody else about it that they'd put away or something."

"What convinced you differently?"

"One day, between matinees, a little girl got separated from her family. Her mom was real upset and panicking. Pop organized a search party right away. I told Mom that they were looking in the wrong place, that the little girl wasn't even on the fairgrounds. That she'd wandered over to the surrounding woods and was picking flowers. Mom didn't believe me at first, but I made her listen and go with me."

"And--?"

"We found the little girl just like I said. I thought Mom would be proud of me-- Bruce, I *saw* her all the way over to where she was picking flowers!--but instead, Mom took me aside and made me promise that I'd never tell anyone *how* I'd known where to look. She was scared, Bruce. Really scared. I'd never seen my mom like that."

"Did you ever talk to your parents about it afterwards?" Bruce asked.

Dick shook his head. "I tried, but Mom was really upset. I overheard her and Dad talking in their room. I could hear her crying." Dick recalled that night...

When his parents stepped out into the tiny family room, Dick jumped up and hugged his mother.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he cried. "I promise I won't do it again. I promise." His mother softly stroked him and crooned that everything was going to be all right. Both she and his father knelt before him, holding him close.

"Son, you haven't done anything wrong," his dad reassured him. "Your mom and I both want you to know that we're not mad at you. We've never been mad at you."

"We love you, Dicky," his mom said. "More than you'll ever know...more than anything in the whole world!"

"And because we love you, son," his dad added, "we have to ask that you promise never to--"

"Dad, I promise!" Dick interrupted. "I promise I'll never do it again. Not *ever*!"

John Grayson reached a hand up and gently cupped his son's face with it. "Dicky, your mom and I love you so much," he whispered fiercely. "You're the best kid in the world! We don't want to lose you. If anyone ever found out about this, they could come and take you from us."

By now Dick was hugging both of his parents and sobbing raggedly.

"I promise, Dad! Cross my heart! I love you, too..."

Dick stopped reciting what happened. He sat for a long moment recalling his parents' tearful embrace.

"We never talked about it again," he said. "If I ever had one of my *episodes*, Mom and Dad would pretend that they hadn't noticed it. I tried not to do it, honest! But sometimes it just happens...I don't know why or how!"

"I see. So basically you have no explanation for this strange ability of yours, nor do you have any idea of how to control it," Bruce concluded.

"No," Dick said in a small voice. Turning pain-filled eyes to Bruce, he asked, "What am I, Bruce? Am I some kind of freak? Is that why Mom and Dad were scared? I don't understand."

"Dick, you're *not* a freak!" Bruce said sharply. "You're a little boy with a strange gift, a gift which makes you very unusual and special. Whatever this remarkable enhanced vision power of yours is, I'm sure that we'll find a reasonable and logical explanation for it."

Dick shook his head. "You don't know. You didn't see." Remembering the strange, burning sensations in his eyes when Gino held the shotgun pointed at his head, Dick's fear rose from the pit of his stomach.

"Didn't see what?" Bruce asked.

"The gun...his hands--" Dick's face grew pinched with apprehension. Bruce waited for him to continue. "I-I just l-looked at the sh-shotgun, and it t-turned red, and started to glow," Dick said. "H-h-his h-h-hands...th-th-they were b-burned. Real bad."

Bruce didn't say anything. He recalled the gunman's badly burned hands. A cold feeling seemed to take hold of his insides. He studied his ward's anguished features. The boy was clearly hurting inside. Bruce had sudden desire to hit something.

Whatever these strange abilities of Dick's, frightening or not, his parents should *never* have allowed them to develop without some kind of proper training.

"And at the cliff, before he threw me over," Dick was saying, "Zucco said th- that mom and dad weren't my real parents. That h-he'd forged my birth certificate. I didn't want to believe him, but..." He paused, swallowing, blinking rapidly.

"When I saw him and Pop arguing, Pop threatened he'd call the police. Zucco just laughed and said something about 'What was Pop gonna do? Tell the cops that he'd paid him to forge a paper nine years ago?'"

Bruce could see that he was valiantly fighting the tears that were

again threatening.

"Who am I, Bruce?" he asked softly. "What am I?"

Bruce studied his young vulnerable ward for a few moments before replying. Standing up, he moved over to the despondent boy and knelt before him. Bruce lightly placed his forefinger on Dick's chin and gently raised it until they were at eye level with each other.

"Dick, I can't explain these enhanced vision powers of yours, not without further investigation. But as for *who* you are you are...We'll find out. I promise."

"G'night, Alfred," Dick said softly, yawning. He was tucked away safely in bed and exhausted from the day's activities.

"Good night, young sir," Alfred said. "Pleasant dreams."

Bruce reached over and ruffled Dick's hair. "That was quite a spectacular save you did tonight," he said, sounding suitably impressed. "I'm not sure that *I* would've been able to reach the line from ten feet away."

Dick shrugged as if aerial acrobatics were no big deal.

Still aching from the pain of his parents' tragic and sudden loss, Dick asked the question uppermost on his mind.

"Why do people have to suffer so much, Bruce? Why is there so much hurt in the world? Doesn't God care about us?"

Bruce swallowed, feeling his chest tighten.

"I wish I knew how to answer you, Dick. I simply don't know."

"Is that why you became the Batman?" Dick asked. "To help people who are suffering? Like you did when you were a little boy?"

Bruce nodded mutely, unable to answer. The boy's keen insight just had a way of stabbing at his heart and conscience.

"I want to help, too, Bruce," Dick said. "Please? Will you let me be your partner?"

Bruce was about to say 'no' when perversely he nodded 'yes.' Not fully understanding why he agreed to this dangerous scheme, Bruce nevertheless felt that he'd made the right decision.

"Okay, Dick, I'll train you, but understand from the outset that there are rules--*my* rules--that you'll follow. Without question or hesitation. And you don't go out until *I* say you're ready, not before." He held his ward's eyes steadily. "Do I make myself clear?"

Dick nodded, his eyes serious, yet lit with an inner elation.

"And these strange powers and abilities of yours," Bruce added. "For

now, you are *not* to use them in public--under *any* circumstances, not until I find out some more information about you. Meanwhile, as part of your training, we'll explore your abilities under controlled conditions in the Batcave."

At the prospect of actually being allowed to explore his strange gifts, Dick's eyes widened and his mouth formed a small 'O.'

"Are you sure it's okay?" he asked hesitantly. Looking away, he added, "I promised Mom and Dad..."

"Dick, I believe that every individual has a right to reach his or her fullest potential," Bruce explained quietly. "I also believe that if left untrained, these powers of yours might prove more dangerous than otherwise."

Dick thought about this and finally nodded at the wisdom behind the words.

"So, are we agreed?" Bruce asked.

Dick nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Then put 'er there, partner," Bruce said, holding out his hand. Dick took it and they shook solemnly, sealing their agreement.

Chapter Five

Bruce followed the colorful signs along the dusty back roads. He'd found the Haly Circus' itinerary changed somewhat. Without the 'Flying Graysons' as its star act, most of the venues in which they'd been scheduled to perform had cancelled.

Bruce finally found them playing in a backwater town about 100 miles west of Okalahoma City. "And about a hundred miles east of nowhere," Bruce muttered.

As he made a final left turn, Bruce could make out the large tents and lines of motor homes. Parking the rented Ford Explorer in the visitors' area, Bruce got out of the car, and looking around, spotted a sign directing visitors to the manager's office.

Walking through the early morning circus grounds, Bruce watched and listened as humans and animals called, roared or trumpeted their morning greetings to each other. Roustabouts and performers rushed from here to there, taking care of their morning chores. Despite the hustle and bustle, Bruce detected subtle differences in the Haly fairgrounds from the previous time. The atmosphere felt muted, as opposed to the laughter and gaiety he remembered from before. Small clumps of people in various stages of dress (and, in some cases, *undress*) gathered in twos and threes, speaking in low tones among themselves.

Finding a motor home clearly labeled 'Manager's Office,' Bruce climbed the steps to the outer stoop and knocked.

There was no answer. He looked around impatiently to see if he could find anyone who could help him. About to turn away, he was stopped by

a voice from behind and below him.

"What do you need, mister?"

Bruce turned to the new voice. A rather rotund woman with what looked like 100% percent of her body covered in tattoos was glaring up at him. Bruce managed to hide his startled reaction at her appearance. He knew her instantly, of course. Dick had talked about her enough times, Maggie, the Tattooed Lady.

Bruce noted that despite her rather freakish exterior Maggie nevertheless carried herself with an almost regal air. About to ask for help, he saw her sudden look of recognition.

"You're Bruce Wayne," she said. It sounded like an accusation.

Bruce nodded, climbing down to where she was. "I'm here to see Mr. Haly," he said.

"Why?" she asked sharply. "You've already taken the man's heart. Are you here to take his soul, too?"

Bruce must have looked surprised at the verbal attack, because she immediately relented. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wayne," she apologized. "But we all miss Johnny and Mary so much. And the court's refusal to let us keep Dicky...it hurt us. It hurt Pop most of all. He loved that boy like a grandson." She looked away, her eyes bright with tears.

"He hasn't been able to get over the double loss. He won't eat, doesn't make his daily rounds...he's missed two performances. One time he showed up so drunk, he almost couldn't stand up."

Maggie waved an arm, taking in the sadly dilapidated circus grounds.

"We were never in the same league as Barnum and Baily, but we gave 'em a run for their money. Now..." she shook her head sadly. "The Haly Circus has always been a family operation. Many of us are second and third generation Haly performers. Johnny's parents and grandparents were 'Flying Graysons' before him." She paused, smiling at the memory. "He and Mary were so excited to have a son who would carry on the family tradition."

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Now, we've been losing performers almost on a weekly basis. The Donner Family--our horse trainers--left yesterday. The Great Carlo, the escape artist, received a contract offer from Circus Circus in Vegas. He hasn't signed it yet, but I'm afraid that we'll be losing him soon."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Maggie," Bruce said sincerely. She nodded, wiping tears and blowing her nose.

"This isn't your problem, Mr. Wayne," she apologized. "I'm sorry. You said you wanted to see Pop. Let me go inside and tell him." About to turn away, she looked up at Bruce and added pointedly, "This may take a while. Maybe you'd better walk around and come back in about a half hour."

Nodding, Bruce walked away.

It was almost an hour before a colorfully bedecked clown with a perennially sad face came up to him.

"Mr. Wayne?" he spoke with a slight Texas drawl. "Maggie sent me to get ya'll. Pop'll see yuh now." Bruce thanked him and made his way back to the Manager's Office.

He'd already seen more than he'd planned to. The Haly Circus was Dick's extended family, whether or not they were blood relations. Dick loved these people, and from what he'd seen and heard before and after the custody hearings, Bruce knew that the feelings were mutual.

What he saw now would've broken Dick's heart. As he approached Haly's trailer, Bruce resolved that Dick would never see the circus under these conditions...

Knocking at the trailer door, Bruce heard a faint, "Come in." Opening the door, Bruce stepped through. He blinked in the sudden gloom of the interior. When his eyes adjusted, he saw that the motor home was rather modest, but showed homey touches that had been added for comfort.

A cross-stitched wall hanging said "Home Sweet Home." Several photographs lined the wall of the living area. Bruce saw one of the Flying Graysons standing in the middle of center ring, saluting the crowds. A child's crayon drawing of a circus ringmaster, wearing a red coat, and holding a whip in one hand and a megaphone in the other, caught his eye. The legend "Pop" was scrawled in purple crayon on the side.

Bruce sniffed involuntarily, narrowing his eyes slightly. The distinct smell of cheap liquor permeated the small space. It was slightly overlaid by the smell of freshly made coffee, but it wasn't quite eradicated.

Bruce looked over to where the imposing figure of Harriman H. "Pop" Haly, owner and ringmaster of Haly Circus, sat behind a tiny cluttered desk. Bruce noted the cup of black coffee on the desk. It was still steaming.

Maggie walked in carrying a fresh pot of coffee, another cup, and cream and sugar.

"How do you take your coffee, Mr. Wayne?" she asked. Bruce was staring at Haly through narrowed eyes. The man had the distinct look of someone who'd been on a binge--reddened eyes, with nose and cheeks slightly splotched. His still-wet hair showed he'd just showered.

"Mr. Wayne?" Maggie prompted.

"Black, please," Bruce replied.

"Bruce Wayne," Pop said sardonically. "To what, may I ask, do we owe this visit?"

Ignoring Haly's belligerent tone, Bruce accepted the cup of coffee. Walking up to the child's drawing of Haly, he noted that it was signed in red crayon, "Love, Dicky (6 years old)."

Turning around, he addressed Pop. "I came to talk to you, Mr. Haly. About Dick." Looking at Maggie, he added, "In private."

"Whatever you have to say to me, Wayne," Pop said, "you can say in front of Maggie."

Bruce's dark features instantly hardened, becoming dangerously cold. Maggie looked nervously at Pop.

"That's okay, Pop," she said, "I'll step outside. Just holler if you need me." Turning to Bruce, she raised her head and walked out, her carriage regally dignified.

After Maggie left, both men sat and stared without speaking, each sizing up the other. Finally, Pop spoke.

"It's **your** dime, Wayne," he said.

Bruce took a sip of the piping hot coffee, still studying the older man over the rim of the cup. Carefully setting the cup down, he leaned forward.

"I want to know about Dick, Haly," he said without preamble. "I want to know how the Graysons got him and who his **real** parents are."

Pop's stared in mute shock at Bruce, his eyes as wide as saucers. This was obviously the **last** thing he'd expected Bruce to bring up. Attempting to cover up his reaction, he tried to bluster his way out of it.

"I've no idea what you're talking about, Wayne. How **dare** you badmouth Johnny and Mary Grayson. Those kids were the finest...why, they loved Dicky more than anything--!"

"I'm not here to speak ill of the Graysons, Haly. I know they loved Dick, and that Dick returns that love. Just as I know that **you** also loved the Graysons. **And** Dick." Bruce pinned Pop with a sharp look.

"And because of your 'love' for them, you made a deal with the devil...Zucco. He was only a small-time hood back then, your personal bookie, I believe. You had him forge a birth certificate in order to explain the baby, didn't you?"

Pop shook his head in denial. "No! That's not true! Mary was expecting their first baby when she took ill. The Graysons pulled out of the rest of the season so that she could get needed bed rest. But everything turned out all right! Dicky was born exactly on the day he was due, March twenty-first!" He looked beseechingly at Bruce.

"Dicky was Johnny and Mary's baby. Just ask anyone. I mean, **look** at him...he's spitting image of Mary. Everyone says so!"

"Haly, I've only had Dick a few weeks, and in that time, people have

come up to us in restaurants and on other family outings, and commented on how much like father and son *we* look." Bruce glared at the circus owner. He didn't want to hurt the man; he only wanted information.

"What happened with Zucco? He became greedy, didn't he? He heard about how much money the circus raised for the charity event, didn't he?"

Pop looked helplessly at Bruce. He covered his eyes suddenly, overcome with the guilt that had been eating away at him. Unable to speak, he nodded.

Bruce didn't say anything, allowing the man to get himself under control. He sat quietly drinking his still-hot coffee. At last, Pop sniffed loudly, cleared his throat, and began to talk...

Bruce drove through the dismal, seemingly endless Kansas landscape. A hard winter had hit the local area. Fields blanketed in snow and ice dominated the countryside. Occasionally, he'd spot a lonely wisp of smoke announcing an isolated farmhouse. Weather forecasters warned of another impending storm.

As he drove, last night's phone call home came back to him. He'd given Alfred instructions regarding the Haly Circus, and Alfred had spoken of how well Dick's studies were coming along...

"I want this done discreetly, Alfred," Bruce said. "Tell Lucius that I want the trust fund set up immediately, with the first certified check in the amount of two hundred fifty thousand personally hand delivered to Haly. And Haly is *not* to know who the money's from. I may not personally like or approve of the man, but he's Dick's godfather, and the circus is the boy's extended family. I can't stand by and allow them to go under."

"Of course, sir," Alfred said. "I'll speak with Mr. Fox first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, Alfred," Bruce said, and then changing the subject, asked the question uppermost on his mind. "How're Dick's 'studies' coming along?"

"He's remarkably astute, sir," Alfred said. "He's able to grasp new and difficult concepts almost from the start. Plus, he's quick to make almost instantaneous leaps to newer and higher levels." He paused. "I do believe, Master Bruce, that the young master will prove an exceptionally brilliant student."

Bruce sat back on the hotel's double bed. He felt an instant's flash of pride at the report. Allowing himself a half-smile, he said, "Put 'im on, Alfred."

"Yes, sir."

Less than a second later, Dick was on the other end. It was obvious from his excited voice that he'd been waiting eagerly to speak to his

guardian.

"Bruce!" Dick cried. "Guess what? Those meditation exercises you showed me *really* helped. I'm getting better each day...Alfred said so."

"That's great to hear, Dick," Bruce said quietly.

"But we found out something kinda weird," Dick added. "Lead seems to block it. For some reason, I can't do anything if there's something made up of lead in the way."

Bruce knew what Dick meant by 'it.' The boy was referring to his vision powers. Alfred must have cautioned him on not referring directly to his gifts over an unsecured phone line. The boy was certainly a quick learner.

"Hmmm...That's interesting," Bruce said. "We'll have to investigate that further when I get home. But in the meanwhile, how are *you* doing? Are you getting more comfortable with it?"

"Well..." Dick said uncertainly. "Sometimes, when I think about my promise...I don't know, I feel a little guilty. But I s'pose it's okay, 'cause I promised to not do it where outsiders could see me. I guess it's okay to practice in a cave with only family."

Bruce felt a moment's pause at Dick's use of the word 'family' in reference to Alfred and himself. He felt his throat tighten momentarily.

"That's right, son," Bruce reassured him. "It's okay, as long as it's only in front of family. For now, at least."

There was a slight pause at the other end. Finally, Dick spoke in a small voice. "Bruce?"

"Yes?"

"When are you coming home?"

Bruce swallowed, feeling himself fill with new and unbidden emotions. How could this one small boy affect him so, he wondered?

"I have a few more things to care of, Dick," he heard himself saying. Bruce hadn't told Dick that he was investigating his origins. "The executives that I'm dealing with can be unreasonable at times. But I should be done within another couple of days."

"Oh," Dick said, disappointed. "Alfred misses you an awful lot..."

Bruce sat up in bed and ran his hand through his hair. Almost not trusting himself to speak, he said, "Tell him I miss him, too."

"I will," Dick said. "Bruce?"

"Yes?"

"I miss you, too," Dick said hurriedly. "G'bye."

Before Bruce could reply, the line went dead. Staring at the phone in his hand for a moment longer, Bruce hung up and slowly sank back into his pillows...

At last, Bruce came up to a sign announcing the town of Smallville. Pop told him that this was about *where* the Graysons said they'd found Dick.

Bruce remembered the sick feeling at the pit of his stomach when Pop told him *how* the Graysons said they'd gotten the boy...

Pop stared at the photo on the wall of the Flying Graysons. His voice took on a dreamy faraway quality.

"He was going to be the best 'flyer' in the world, Wayne," he said. "Did you know that? Only three other aerialists in the world could do what he did--the quadruple somersault. And he was getting ready to outdo them all." He looked directly at Bruce.

"Dicky was *this* close," he said, holding his thumb and forefinger almost together. "*This* close to perfecting the quintuple somersault." At Bruce's look of disbelief, Pop nodded proudly.

"I see you understand the significance of such a feat. No one, Wayne...*no one* in the entire world has ever successfully performed a quintuple somersault. People say it can't be done. But Dicky...Wayne the boy is the most naturally gifted aerialist in the world. He's brilliant in the air. Sometimes...sometimes it almost seems as if he really *is* flying."

He looked away bitterly. "But now? Now, he's going to grow up and be just like everybody else. A spectator and not a performer." He spat the words out as if they were a condemnation of the human race and glared at Bruce.

"What the court did--'in the best interests of the child'--it arbitrarily took away the boy's heritage...his legacy! They said that an 'iterant' circus was not a fit place to raise a child! Well, *I* grew up in the circus. So did my father, and my father's father. And Johnny Grayson was a third generation member of the Haly Circus family."

"That may be so, Haly," Bruce said quietly. "And maybe I agree with you in many ways. However, it doesn't take away from the fact that *you* got Tony Zucco, a known racketeer, to falsify an official document for you over nine years ago. More specifically, you had him forge Dick's birth certificate. And because you wouldn't pay extortion money, Zucco murdered the Graysons."

Pop's face had gone sheet-white.

"I don't have anything personal against you or your reasons for what you did, Haly. You obviously did it because you wanted to help the Graysons, two people whom you cared about. But it backfired! John and Mary Grayson are dead. And they've left behind a scared and confused little boy who suddenly doesn't know who he really is. The Graysons

are gone, Haly. Nothing you say can hurt them anymore. However, there's still a little boy who loves you very much and who needs your help." Bruce paused gauging the effect of his words.

"Will you help me, help him?"

Reluctantly, Pop nodded.

Bruce parked the Explorer on the side of the road. He was pulling the Graysons' small equipment trailer.

Funny, there was still a 'For Sale' sign on the sagging fence. Pop told him that the Graysons remembered a sign reading "Schuster's Field, For Sale by owner." Depending on what he discovered here, Bruce Wayne might just become the proud owner of a Kansas farm field, he decided.

As Bruce picked his way through the snow-covered field, he thought back on his final moments with the Haly Circus. He'd made arrangements to ship all of the Graysons' personal effects to Wayne Manor, and gave instructions to Pop to either sell the motor home, or donate it to another circus family that needed one.

Before leaving the circus campgrounds, Bruce went through the Graysons' motor home...

Maggie let him in.

"I've been taking care of it," she explained. "You know, in case Dicky might return one day..." She looked away, unable to finish her thought. They both knew of the unlikelihood of this occurring.

Nodding his thanks, Bruce waited for her to leave before he began searching through the Graysons' personal effects. John and Mary Grayson had been very neat and organized people. Their financial books were largely up-to-date, showing that they'd wisely invested in Dick's future.

Since they were circus aerialists, the young parents were largely uninsurable. To prevent their son growing up destitute should anything happen to them, they'd started an investment portfolio in the baby's name shortly after they got him. Bruce reluctantly nodded in approval. He'd turn it over to Lucius Fox.

As he rifled through the desk, he found a baby book tucked away in a bottom drawer. Pulling it out, he started flipping through it.

Bruce's throat caught as he literally saw Dick grow up before his eyes. Since finding out that the Graysons weren't really Dick's parents and that they'd kept him from exploring his special gifts, he'd been struggling with inner feelings of anger directed at the couple.

Seeing them through the camera's eye, Bruce's initial assessment of

the Graysons began to change. Mary's love for Dick seemed to leap out of every photograph with the boy, and John's pride in his son was obvious on his face.

About to close the photo album, Bruce was surprised by something falling out. He heard it ping as it bounced underneath the desk. Bending down, he felt around for a few moments. At last, his fingers touched something small, a key.

Raising a single eyebrow, he again flipped through the baby book, looking for the place from where the key might've fallen out. At last, he came to a page faded with time on which the distinct, darker image of a key had imprinted itself. Underneath the image a caption read, "Smallville Self-Storage..."

"The Graysons insisted that they *found* the baby in the field," Bruce muttered. "Something about a plane crash, but Haly says that they were never clear about it. And they never changed their story." He looked around the frozen, snow-covered grounds. "If it *was* a plane crash, then Dick *might* have living relatives somewhere. And if he *does*..."

If Dick did have living relatives, then it would be Bruce's responsibility to hand him over. He felt a momentary pang at the thought. Standing still, he stared pensively at the frozen field.

"I guess I know how Haly felt when he had to give up the boy," he said, chagrined.

He remembered Dick's heartfelt question, "Why is there so much hurt in world...?" Bruce sighed.

"I wish I knew, son," he said softly. Easily vaulting over the fence, Bruce began to walk around, his experienced eyes searching for anything unusual. He didn't really expect to find anything after all these years, especially under snow cover, but he'd investigated enough so-called "hopeless" cases to know that there was always a chance that something could turn up.

Bruce stopped. There was something unusual about the landscape that wasn't quite registering. Something not quite right.

Bruce stood, his head cocked to one side, letting his eyes *see* what he knew he instinctively *felt* to be wrong.

Suddenly, he saw it. The northernmost part of the field was oddly misshapen. It looked like a part of it had been gouged out. While the snow cover camouflaged most of it, once Bruce knew what to look for, he saw it.

He trudged up to it, the hardened snow making walking difficult. His cold weather boots made a distinct crunching/sucking sound as he walked. Each step broke through the ice and left an imprint about five inches deep.

"Guess we're not in Gotham anymore," he muttered.

Arriving at the scarred ground, he noted that it was a straight line, ending at the furthest point with what looked like an impact crater, as if an object had hit there with tremendous force.

"They claimed that it was a plane crash," he muttered and just as quickly shook his head. A plane crash would've been seen. It would've been investigated. "Then what?"

A glowing object caught his eye. Curious, he dug around it. As he cleared the snow, the glow grew brighter in its intensity. Whatever it was, it was glowing green.

When he finally cleared it, he saw that it was a small, quarter-sized rock, radiating a strange, green glow. He'd never seen anything like it before. Mentally going through every type of rock and mineral that he recognized on sight, Bruce finally gave up.

Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a plastic baggie and carefully placed it inside. He'd have to check it back in the SUV for radiation. Setting it down where he'd easily find it, he climbed down into the crater...

Thirty minutes later he was pulling into Smallville. The field hadn't produced anything, except the strange green rock. Analysis showed that while it was emitting some type of radiation, it wasn't dangerous to carbon life forms.

"Of course," Bruce thought sardonically, "the readings weren't exactly conclusive. It's hard to analyze something that barely registers on the scale." To Bruce's surprise, the spectro-analyzer almost couldn't read the rock. "Like as if it doesn't exist," he murmured.

Whatever the rock was made of, it was material that a normal spectro-analyzer wasn't calibrated to read properly.

"The way to fix the problem," he said, "is to somehow find a way *to* properly calibrate it." But he'd have to wait until he got it back to the Batcave.

Bruce spotted a general store on Main Street. Parking, he walked in to ask for directions. A friendly looking gentleman stood behind the store counter. As Bruce walked in, the man looked up and smiled.

"Well, hello there, sir," he said pleasantly. "Just passing through?"

At Bruce's nod, he smiled again and added, "How may I help you?"

Bruce walked up to the snack counter and picked out a few bags of chips. Noticing a refrigerator, he pulled out a soft drink. He walked up to the counter with his selections, and spoke while the store clerk rang up his purchases.

"I actually need some information," Bruce began. "I'm looking for a place called 'Smallville Self-Storage'--is that still around?"

"Why it sure *is*!" another voice spoke up. Both men turned.

"Martha!" the man behind the counter called pleasantly. "I didn't think you were coming in today. Hear from Clark?"

Martha walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Now, Jonathan, just because I was baking and doing the wash today is no reason to count me out. And, yes, Clark called. He and Lois will be over this weekend. I think it's serious," she added excitedly. Turning to Bruce, she addressed him directly.

"Clark's our son. He's a--"

"He's a hotshot reporter in some big city newspaper," Jonathan interrupted.

"The Daily Planet," Martha said proudly. "Maybe you've heard of him, Clark Kent? He won the Pulitzer Prize last year."

Bruce had indeed heard of Clark Kent. He was one of Metropolis' topnotch investigative reporters. In fact, Bruce had tried to entice him to over to *his* paper, the Gotham Gazette, a subsidiary of Wayne Enterprises.

Kent had thanked him politely, but refused the offer, saying he liked it where he was. Of course, Bruce also met Lois Lane at the time, and personally felt that Kent had other reasons for staying at the Planet.

"Kids," Jonathan was saying. "You raise 'em, teach 'em the family business, and what do they do? They grow up and leave home to become reporters, instead of self-respecting farmers!"

"Oh, Jonathan!" Martha chastised, laughing. "He doesn't mean that. Jonathan's pleased as punch that our boy is so talented." Smiling she asked, "Do *you* have children, Mr...?"

"Wayne, Thomas Wayne," Bruce replied, using his father's name. Looking at her steadily, he added, "Yes, Mrs. Kent. I have a child. A boy."

"Oh, you must be so proud," she said. "We couldn't have children, so when a second cousin had a baby, and she couldn't care for him proper, well, we jumped at the chance. Clark's been such a blessing for us...He's about *your* age, in fact."

"Martha," Jonathan said gently, "Mr. Wayne doesn't need to hear our life story. You'll have to excuse my wife, Mr. Wayne. When it comes to our boy, she can just about gnaw your ear off."

"Oh, you!" Martha protested, chuckling. She slapped him playfully on the shoulder. Turning to Bruce she asked, "You wanted to know about the Smallville Self-storage?"

He nodded.

"It's located just a mile outside of town. If you drive straight down Main Street and keep on going for a bit, you shouldn't miss it."

"Thank you," Bruce replied. About to leave, he stopped and asked another question. "Excuse me, sir, ma'am, but I was wondering if you could help me with another question?"

Jonathan and Martha looked at each other and then back at him, nodding.

"Some friends of mine passed through here about nine years ago. On the first day of spring," he added. "They told me that while driving through this area, they saw something strange in the sky. Like a meteor or something." Studying their expressions, he asked, "Do you remember anything like that?"

Jonathan looked thoughtful. "Nine years ago? No...can't say I recall anything unusual. Martha? You remember?"

"Hmmm. Nine years? That's quite a while ago, young man. A lotta things've happened in nine years."

"Well, they mentioned that whatever it was crash-landed onto a place called Schuster's Field," Bruce said, hopefully. "They remembered that because there was a 'For Sale' on it at the time."

Jonathan slapped his knee with excitement at this added bit of information. "Tarnation! You know, I seem to recall something like that. And it **was** near Schuster's Field, in fact!" He gesticulated excitedly and added, "By gum, I remember now! Martha, you were with me! Remember, it was that time that you'n me was headed to Schuster's field to take a look at it 'cause I was thinking about expanding the farm."

"Why, yes, I remember." She looked at Bruce. "You're right, it **was** the first day of spring. A beautiful March day. It was towards evening when we set out. About halfway there, we saw this tremendous light up in the sky. It looked like a meteor or a comet."

"It sure did," Jonathan agreed. "And, by golly, after it sorta 'swooshed' over our heads, we heard a really loud noise, like an explosion, that rocked the countryside. I near lost control of the pickup we was in."

"That's right," Martha said, chiming in. "Why, by the time we got to Schuster's field, whatever had hit had probably disintegrated on impact."

"There was this big tear in the ground," Jonathan added. "The meteor gouged right through that field." He shook his head sadly. "Ruined a perfectly good field, too," he added. "Poor Schuster. He's never been able to sell it since."

"But you never actually saw what hit there?" Bruce asked.

"No," Martha mused. "Like I said, we assumed that it just disintegrated when it hit."

"Could it have been a plane?" Bruce asked.

Jonathan shook his head. "No, a plane would've left some type of debris," he said. "I served in the Army during the Korean conflict. Believe me, I've seen enough downed planes to recognize a crash

sight."

Bruce nodded his thanks. As he climbed into his rented SUV, Bruce noted that the middle-aged couple were talking and laughing together inside the store.

"If they'd arrived in Schuster's Field just a few moments sooner..."

Bruce shook his head at the vagaries of fate.

End of Part 1 (Continues on Part 2, coming soon, to a fanfiction site near you!:))

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2. (Part 2)

Author: Syl Francis Email: efrancis@earthlink.net Title: Robin, the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] Rating: PG Part 2

Summary: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...Robin?! Part Two contains Chapters 6- 10. Dick begins to explore his long-latent powers. Bruce travels to Smallville, Kansas to investigate the secret that John and Mary Grayson took with them to the grave.

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Robin: the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] By Syl Francis

Chapter Six

Dick woke up that morning feeling excited. For the past week, each day had been one of new and spine-tingling surprises. It was amazing how quickly he was learning to control his unique gifts.

He grinned to himself. In order to 'catalogue' Dick's vision powers, Alfred assigned them 'names.' The boy's ability to see through objects was now called 'X-ray vision' and his remarkable talent for heating things up to the melting point, they called--duh!--'Heat vision.'

Dick chuckled at their lack of imagination.

Alfred also helped Dick realize that he could see things far away. He pointed out that by being able to *see* that little girl from a distance all those years ago, then quite possibly Dick also had what

Alfred called 'Telescopic vision.'

To test it, Dick immediately ran outside to the front lawn and tried to spot the iron gates, which led to the estate, located almost a mile down the gravel drive.

"Whoa," he whispered, as he zoomed in on his objective. A black crow suddenly swooped into his line of vision and startled him. Crying out, Dick automatically ducked and covered his head in reflex. It seemed as if the bird was right on his face.

Realizing his mistake, Dick looked up at Alfred, slightly embarrassed. Alfred smiled down at him and gently squeezed his shoulder.

"That's quite all right, Master Dick," he said. "The point is, you *can* do it. With practice comes familiarity. You'll soon grow used to it."

Dick smiled back.

It wasn't until after he worked with Batman's electron microscope for the first time, that Dick realized he could also see things unaided at the microscopic level. This was a revelation that surprised them both. Furthermore, he discovered that if he concentrated sufficiently, he could also see all the way to the sub-atomic level.

Seeing a whole new universe open up to him, Dick stared in wonder. Finally, snapping out of it, he looked up at Alfred, dazed by this totally unexpected and newfound ability.

"It's *beautiful*, Alfred! I wish I could show you, so *you* could see it, too."

"This wonderful gift will prove quite useful during your investigations, young sir," Alfred told him. "A large part of detective work is done in the forensics lab, as you will soon see. Master Bruce is probably the world's greatest detective, but even he can't see everything at a crime scene without his special equipment."

Dick nodded, slightly overwhelmed by his new discoveries.

As the week passed, Alfred continuously devised new exercises for Dick requiring that he use his vision powers both alone and in combination. The big test came last night, shortly before Bruce called. Dick was required to find a microdot that Alfred had hidden in the Gotham City museum that afternoon.

Dick had to use his telescopic vision to locate the museum, his X-ray vision to see through its impressive facade, and because it was after hours, through the gloom, as well. Finally, Dick was required to use his microscopic vision to locate the microdot.

The first two steps proved relatively easy. The last part was a bit more difficult. Dick was forced to concentrate on not only finding the microdot, but also to remain at a certain magnification, without inadvertently sliding into the sub-atomic level.

He sat cross-legged in the middle of the Batcave, chin in hand, his concentration absolute. He used a meticulous search pattern that Alfred had taught him. Basically, he divided the museum into quadrants. He searched each quadrant before he moved to the next. It was tediously slow going, but it proved effective.

After about an hour of searching, Dick finally found it. He grinned as he read Alfred's message out loud, "Congratulations, Master Dick. You have just won the dinner of your choice and one extra hour of television."

"Oh, boy!" Dick cried. "MacDonald's here we come!"

Alfred rolled his eyes in mock consternation...

Bruce signaled a left and turned into the self-storage driveway. Finding the manager's office he walked in. A bored young girl not yet twenty sat at the front desk. She was busy filing her fingernails and chattering on the phone. When Bruce walked in, she didn't bother to look up. A nameplate identified her as 'Betty Lou.'

"...And he *pinned* me!" she said dreamily, admiring a varsity pin on her sweater's lapel. "Oh, Mary Anne, I could've *died*!" She spun her chair, facing away from Bruce.

Bruce waited "patiently" for about fifteen seconds. Finally, he interrupted her.

"Excuse me," he said.

Betty Lou continued talking and filing her nails.

Bruce reached over to the phone base and pulled the jack out, disconnecting the line. Betty Lou looked up, eyes blazing.

"Hey!" she protested. Taking a good look at her unexpected customer, the rest of her sentence died in her throat. Instead, her expression immediately changed, to one of dreamy admiration. "Hey..." she said throatily.

"I *did* say, 'excuse me,'" Bruce said. She nodded vaguely, bringing her chin to her hand. "Can you help me?" he asked.

Staring up at him, entranced, Betty Lou nodded without offering help.

"Miss, uh, Betty Lou," Bruce said trying again. "I could use some help."

She nodded abstractedly once more, and then, doing a double take, she realized that she had a customer. "Oh--! Of course I can help you...I mean, *how* may I help you?"

Bruce gave her a half-smile. She seemed to melt before him. Bruce handed her the key he'd found in Dick's baby book.

"I wonder if you can tell me what storage bin this goes to?" he asked. She smiled vacuously up at him. "Miss? The key?"

Betty Lou's eyes snapped back to the present. Taking the key from his hands, she looked at closely. Finally, she shook her head.

"I'm sorry, mister," she said. "But this isn't one of our keys." She rummaged in her desk drawer and pulled out another key. The one she held out had a double serrated edge, while the one Bruce had brought in, only had a single edge.

"This is how our keys look," she explained.

Bruce studied it closely. He immediately recognized the make of the key. This type had only been on the market for about seven years.

"Miss, uh, I mean, Betty Lou," he began, "I wonder if there might be someone else here who could help me? It's possible that we rented this space way before your time."

She grimaced slightly, but nodded. "I'll get my mom," she said...

A few moments later, Bruce was in the back office with the manager who introduced herself as Betty Sue.

"We haven't used those keys for almost six years now," she said. "Let me look it up in our old books." Betty Sue led Bruce through a labyrinthine maze in the back.

"We went computerized about seven years ago," she said. "All of the old files were placed in storage. You're lucky, Mr. Wayne. You say that your cousin rented the space some nine years ago? We usually discard old records after ten years."

Betty Sue walked down an aisle, carefully checking a shelf filled with storage boxes. She leaned in close to one in particular and nodded, pulling it out.

"Here it is," she said, hefting the heavy box. The box was marked 'First Quarter,' nine years ago.

"Here, let me take that," Bruce offered. Betty Sue handed Bruce the box and they both made their way to a small break area with a table and chairs. Bruce placed the box on the table and Betty Sue began going through the files.

"Let's see...March...March nineteen, twenty...here we go!" Betty Sue sounded triumphant. She pulled out a manila folder labeled, March 21. "If the space was rented on the twenty-first, it would be here."

Betty Sue took out a pair of glasses and read through the file. "Ah-ha! Here we go. Grayson, John. Small storage bin. Monthly payments." She looked up. "According to this, John Grayson rented a small storage bin--it's about a five by five by six space--over nine years ago. He paid cash and signed a contract to make monthly payments. As far as this record goes, he paid on time." She paused and stood. "Come on. Let's check our computerized files."

She led Bruce to her office. As they crossed the reception area, Betty Sue rebuked her daughter. "Betty Lou, please get off the phone."

This is a business office, not your bedroom." She didn't wait for an answer, but continued into her inner office.

Betty Lou grimaced and hung up reluctantly. She crossed her arms resentfully.

Betty Sue shook her head and smiled sourly. "Kids...carry 'em for nine months, nurse 'em, raise 'em, love 'em, and how do they pay you back? They become teenagers." Her eyes smiled merrily at her own quip.

"Do you have kids, Mr. Wayne?" she asked.

Bruce nodded. "Yes, one...a boy." Funny, less than a month ago the answer would've been 'no.' Now, he'd twice answered in the affirmative in a single day.

"A boy?" she said, enviously. "You're lucky. Less to worry about with a boy than a girl. Still..." she smiled. "You can't dress them in pink ribbons and bows when they're small."

Bruce's eyes lit in amusement while trying to imagine the heavily made up, bleached and blow-dried sullen teenager, who was currently slouching in the reception area, in pink ribbons.

After a few minutes of searching, Betty Sue was successful. "Here we go. Grayson, John. Small storage bin. Paid up till the end of the month." She looked up Bruce. "Mr. Wayne, we're pretty casual here and all but I need to see *something* that tells me you have the authority to get into John Grayson's bin...you know, kind of a formality."

Bruce nodded and pulled out a document authorizing him Power of Attorney over all of John and Mary Graysons personal effects.

Betty Sue took it, photocopied it, and placed it in Grayson's file.

"Will you be closing out his account today?" she asked.

"You say he paid up till the end of the month?" Bruce asked. She nodded. "I need to look at the contents first before I make my final decision."

"Of course," Betty Sue readily agreed. She reached into an expanding file and pulled a single sheet of paper. Bruce saw immediately that it was a map of the storage area. Betty Sue traced Grayson's bin number until she came to the appropriate place on the map. She marked it with orange highlighter and holding the paper out to Bruce gave him the necessary directions.

As Bruce turned to go, she stopped him. "Oh, wait!" she called. She pulled a small key from a key chain around her neck and walked up to a small metal box on the wall. When she opened the box, it revealed several rows of keys.

"Here!" she said, taking out one of the double serrated edged keys that Betty Lou had shown Bruce earlier.

"Almost forgot," she said, handing him the key. "Like I said earlier,

we re-keyed the entire complex several years ago. We sent form letters to all of our long-distance clients informing them of the change and offering them the option of either sending them the key, or maintaining here in the office for them. Grayson never replied to the letter." She shrugged. "We've kept the key stored here as a result."

Bruce nodded his thanks and took the key from her. Stepping out into the biting Kansas air, he followed the map until he reached the one highlighted. Placing the key in the lock, he turned it. He heard the satisfying 'click' announcing that it had been successfully opened.

Bending down, he grabbed the garage-door style handle and pulled up. He expected it to be rusted after all of these years, but it opened easily and smoothly on well-maintained rollers.

Bruce looked inside the small enclosure, his eyes immediately going to the single object, almost shoulder high, kept on a pallet in the far corner. It was covered with a canvas tarpaulin. Walking up to it, he pulled the tarpaulin over to see what was underneath it.

Releasing a breath he hadn't known he was holding, he raised a single eyebrow. The tarpaulin was covering a large wooden crate. Completely uncovering the crate, he reached inside into his hidden jacket pocket and pulled out a special utility knife.

Quickly going through its myriad tools, he found the one he needed. Carefully, he placed the small chisel at two corners and lifted, breaking the seal. Forcing the corners up a few inches, he then pressed a switch on the knife and it became a penlight.

Holding one of the corners up on the crate, Bruce brought the penlight up to the small crack and looked inside.

What he saw made him feel as if he'd just been punched in the stomach...

His eyes lighting with inner excitement, Dick ran down the long, upstairs hallway. Making sure that Alfred wasn't around, he hurriedly executed three handsprings, two back flips, and capped it off with an aerial somersault. Looking guiltily around, he edged towards the corner and looked down the stairs.

Still no sign of Alfred. Not waiting for the opportunity to pass him by, Dick easily mounted the banister on his stomach, and slid down, his arms straight out on either side of him.

Landing with a flourish, Dick raised his arms in a mock victory salute.

"I would say, young sir," Alfred said drolly from behind him--Dick spun around in shock--"That I'd give that an 'eight' for form, and perhaps a 'seven' for artistic interpretation."

"What?" Dick asked, floored.

"Master Bruce had a much better form at your age, I'm afraid," Alfred told him, heading towards the kitchen. "I'm afraid that you'll have to do much better than that if you're to ever become his partner."

Dick stood staring after Alfred. "Did he just give me permission to do it again?" he wondered. Grinning suddenly, he ran back up the stairs taking them two at a time. For the next half-hour, Dick slid down the banister only to run back up and do it once again.

Alfred stuck his head out of the kitchen door once to observe his newest charge's boyish exuberance. Smiling he left Dick to his fun.

As he turned back to the kitchen, he heard Dick cry out, "Woo-hoo! I'm *flying*!" in exultation...

Waving at Betty Lou and Betty Sue, Bruce returned to the main highway leading back to Smallville. He determined that he couldn't trust the contents to a shipping company and decided to drive it back himself.

Settling down for the long drive back to Gotham City, Bruce went over in his mind how he'd ever be able to explain this unexpected development to Dick.

Thinking of Dick, Bruce felt his insides twist. The boy already thought that he was some kind of freak. What would this do to him?

More specifically, how would Bruce be able to tell the already vulnerable boy what he suspected?

That Dick was an extra-terrestrial?

Chapter Seven

"But he's been waiting all day for your arrival, sir!" Alfred protested. "He has something very important to say to you! You *can't* disappoint him!"

"Alfred, what I'm bringing home is dynamite! I can't let the kid *see* this. Not yet, at least. Not until I can think of what to say to him."

Bruce's voice was as close to desperate as Alfred had ever heard. A cold feeling at the pit of his stomach began to spread through his being. What had the Master discovered? Giving himself a mental headshake, Alfred determined that no matter how essential, the information was secondary to Master Dick's emotional well-being. Steeling himself for what he was about say, Alfred spoke calmly.

"Then you shall have to think of something, Master Bruce." Alfred sounded coldly distant. "Because if you hurt this boy, add more pain to what he's already suffered, then--" He paused, his voice catching.

--Then you're not the Bruce Wayne that *I* raised."

"..." Bruce stared at the phone in his hand. He was calling from a rest stop about two hours east of Gotham. He'd stopped to ask Alfred to take Dick on an outing so that he'd be able to arrive and hide his cargo without the boy catching sight of it.

He swallowed, stunned at Alfred's words. The older man had *never* spoken to him in that tone of voice. Even as a child.

Bruce felt an irrational rage suddenly flare at Alfred's disloyalty. In the next instant, he felt completely deflated by his own behavior. He realized that he'd always taken Alfred's instant acquiescence to any of his requests as a given.

He took Alfred's unquestioning loyalty for granted.

Since he'd seen the spacecraft, Bruce had been running on adrenaline. During the middle of the night, he'd inspected it carefully, discovering a hidden mechanism that opened a small hatch. The interior seemed designed specifically as an incubator. Whoever the space traveler that had been carried within, he had been no larger than a common house cat--or a human baby.

Bruce rubbed his eyes feeling more tired than he had in a long time. He leaned back in the cramped space within the phone booth. Taking a grip on his emotions, he spoke.

"Alfred, I-I'm sorry. Tell Dick that I'll be home in a couple of--"

--You may tell him yourself, sir," Alfred interrupted. "Master Dick just stepped into the kitchen. Here he is..."

"Bruce!" Dick spoke excitedly. "You'll *never* guess! Not in a million years! Not in a hundred million! Bruce, I jumped from the floor mat all the way to the trapeze swing! Can you *b'lieve* that? I reached the swings with a single leap!"

Dick walked into the Batcave, his excitement having reached new peaks. Bruce would be home in less than an hour. That was plenty of time to get in a training session.

He recalled the very beginning of his training. Had it really been less than a month? Bruce had started him with meditation techniques. At first Dick thought it silly to sit quietly, legs crossed, without moving, while attempting to empty his mind, but in the following days he found that he could concentrate and focus better.

Nevertheless, while the meditation was interesting and challenging, the athletics, in addition to being allowed to explore his unique gifts, were the fun part. Already a world-class aerialist, Dick took to the training as if born to it. It was soon obvious that in many respects he was the better acrobat and could even teach Bruce a thing or two about it.

Nevertheless, Bruce's analytical mind kept inventing new ways of challenging the junior crimefighter.

On the mat, Bruce's superior skills as a martial artist kept Dick on his toes. Understanding that Dick's acrobatics would work to the boy's advantage, Bruce decided to modify his training in order to make optimum use of his talents.

Before long, Dick was working out in the Special Ops room. This was a remarkable training room that Bruce had built to keep his own skills honed. And Alfred, a former British Intelligence operative, had had a hand in its initial design. The kindly gentleman developed the training programs and virtual reality scenarios to challenge the Dark Knight, and now, the Knight's squire...

Dick stepped into the Special Ops room, and outwardly confident, walked to the center of the room. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest.

"Welcome to Special Ops," the pleasant, computerized female voice said. "This training session is set for Level One. At anytime during this exercise, should you wish to stop the program, recite the following code, Level One Stop Alpha."

"Level One Stop Alpha," Dick repeated in a whisper.

"Level One training session begins in five seconds."

Dick assumed a defensive position. That's when the laser bombardment began.

Instantly, Dick back flipped, rolled, leaped, and cart-wheeled out of harms' way. The lasers were non-lethal and registered a "kill" by special sound effects.

As the session continued, Dick somehow avoided being hit. He dodged, rolled, somersaulted, ran, and jumped--the list was endless. The bombardment came in a relentless barrage of single, double, and triple beams striking at random.

After a nonstop attack, the beams suddenly stopped. Crouching in a defensive stance, at the far corner of the training room, his breath coming in ragged gasps, Dick mentally assessed his performance.

So far, so good. He was still 'alive.' Concentrating on the job at hand, Dick had a sudden idea. At the same instant, the laser salvo resumed. Not stopping to think, Dick leaped straight up, somersaulting almost twenty feet in the air, and safe from the ground level bombardment.

About to cry out in triumph, he was hit center mass by a single beam.

"Awww-www...*no*!" Dick cried.

"This ends your Level One training session," the computer said pleasantly. "Better luck next time." The room's lights came on. He blinked in the sudden brightness.

"If this is Level One," he muttered ruefully, "I'd hate to see Level Two."

"Master Dick," Alfred's calm voice spoke over the intercom, "well done. You were only killed twenty times, severely wounded a mere fifty times, and slightly wounded seventy-five times. Not bad for a first go."

"But I was only hit once!" Dick protested.

The door to the control room slid open. "I removed the 'kill' response," Alfred explained. "I didn't want you to grow discouraged on your first outing with this infernal machine. Don't worry, young sir. Master Bruce was killed twenty-*one* times on his first outing."

Dick's eyes lit. "Really? Cool!"

A few minutes later, as he stepped out of the showers, Dick asked, "What I don't understand, Alfred, is how you knew that I'd try the jump?"

"Let's say that I *anticipated* it, young sir," Alfred explained. "You've discovered a new skill. It's only natural that you'd try to use it. However--"

--"However, combat is the *last* place where you should try new abilities for the first time," Bruce finished.

Dick spun around, and cutting through the gloom in the Batcave with his X-ray vision, spotted his guardian.

"Bruce!" he cried, running happily towards him. Bruce bent and easily lifted the small boy to him. The two hugged unselfconsciously. Alfred watched, warmed by the father/son relation that was so quickly being forged between his two charges.

"Now *that's* the Bruce Wayne *I* raised," he said to himself.

"Bruce, I've got so much to show you...to tell you!" Dick said hurriedly. Then looking wistful, he asked, "Are you home for good now?"

Holding Dick up to eye level, Bruce gave him a half-smile.

"Sure am, kid," he said. "I did what I had to do, and learned what I needed to know."

"Were those business executives tough customers?" Dick asked seriously.

"The toughest," Bruce replied. "But they didn't know who they were dealing with." He put Dick down and with his hand on the boy's shoulder, they started upstairs to the manor. "I learned how to handle ruthless customers from the very best."

"Who?" Dick asked, wide-eyed.

"Alfred. Everything I ever needed to know, I learned from him."

Bruce checked in on Dick. The boy mumbled in his sleep--"Dad?"--and then tossed restlessly. Bruce walked over and sat at Dick's bedside, waiting. After a few moments it appeared that Dick was again settled back asleep. Bruce glanced at the bedside alarm. It was past eleven.

Time for the Batman to hunt.

Pausing at the bedroom door, Bruce looked back once more. Dick was sleeping soundly. Satisfied, Bruce made his way to the Batcave.

Moments later, Batman emerged from the uniform vault and moved purposefully towards the waiting Batmobile...

Observing from the rooftop across the street from the Kane Savings and Loan, Batman shook his head dismissively.

"Amateurs," he muttered. He thought about waiting for the Boys in Blue to come and break it up, but decided against it. Someone could get hurt or even killed. No, better he just end it now.

Not bothering to fire off a jump line, Batman spread his cape and swooped down on the would-be burglars. One looked up and spotting him, screamed.

"It's the Bat!" he yelled and started running. A well-placed Batarang tripped him before he'd taken five steps.

"Shut up, Frankie," the other said. He was busy working the alarm system. "How many time do I gotta tell ya? There ain't no such thing...the Bat's just a fairytale, like the boogeyman..."

"That's good to know," a gravelly voice said from behind him. "And since the clock just struck midnight, I guess that explains why you're about to turn into a jailbird!"

The thief spun around, and screamed at the nightmarish figure of the Dark Knight. It was the last sound he made...

Dick tossed and turned in troubled sleep.

Images of a cold world lit by a giant red sun and a night sky brightened by three moons disturbed his dreams. He saw birds, the orange and red of open flames, zooming across the crimson sky. Their opposites--birds the color of midnight--flew beside them in tandem in a perennial aerial ballet. Opposites, yet companions, he knew.

He saw mountain ranges made of glittering diamonds whose shimmering splendor were forged by eons of seismic disruptions that he knew were even now tearing the planet's core.

Spectacular cities of dizzying towers and ethereal beauty gleamed in the weak light of the giant star.

Dick felt a deep yearning, almost a summons to go--where? He felt himself being drawn to this world of vermillion skies. This cold, dying world. The need grew in intensity and finally, unable to resist, he sat up and threw off his covers. Cocking his head as if listening, Dick climbed out of bed.

He stood in the middle of his room, eyes open, but unseeing. Finally, as if receiving instructions, he walked out of his room. He passed an open door in the upstairs hallway. A light inside revealed that its occupant was still awake, despite the lateness of the hour. Dick walked on without acknowledgement.

As he passed by, his small figure caught Alfred's attention.

"Master Dick, is there something you need?" Alfred asked from inside. When no answer was forthcoming, he jumped out of his reading chair and stepped into the hallway. He was just in time to see the boy turn the corner to the back staircase. "Master Dick!"

There was no response. Suddenly worried, Alfred dropped his book and ran after the boy. By the time he got to the steps, Dick was already headed towards the study. Taking the steps two at a time, the elderly man reached the bottom of the stairs in time to see Dick enter Bruce's study.

Following closely at the boy's heels, Alfred paused when he entered the room. Dick was standing, unmoving, in front of the secret panel that led to the Batcave. He was just staring.

"Master Dick?"

Again, there was no response from the boy. Alfred studied him for a few moments longer.

"Sleepwalking," he said to himself. Apparently whatever was causing the boy to walk in his sleep, he had to get into the Batcave to settle it. Alfred immediately walked to the grandfather clock and moved the hands to the appropriate positions.

The secret panel clicked open. Dick walked in, and wordlessly, Alfred followed...

The night was relatively quiet. In addition to the attempted break-in at the Savings and Loan, Batman stopped two attempted muggings, one car jacking, and three gang fights. About to call it a night, he caught the GCPD dispatcher calling an all points bulletin.

"All units in the vicinity of Robinson Park, officer down, officer needs help. Repeat. All units in the vicinity of Robinson Park..."

Incredibly, the Batmobile pulled a 180-degree turn, and turbos firing, roared in the direction of Gotham City's famous park...

Alfred worried about his youngest charge. The boy was barefoot and the floor of the Batcave was cold and uneven. Tamping his concerns, he followed behind from a safe distance.

Although asleep, Dick walked without breaking stride. Alfred was surprised when he walked through the main work area and continued down towards some of the darker more treacherous passages. Grabbing a flashlight that was lying in the open, Alfred brought it along, just in case.

After several minutes of walking, Dick came up to the lip of a deep chasm. Alfred had never seen this part of the cave before. Obviously, there were more caverns and side passages than he'd ever taken the time to explore. Standing next to Dick, Alfred risked a look down.

It seemed bottomless. Now what?

Before Alfred could react, Dick suddenly jumped...!

"What do you have?"

Gordon cringed at the gravelly voice. He'd *never* grow used to having Batman sneak up on him. Sighing, he answered without turning.

"Zucco."

"..."

Gordon felt a moment's satisfaction. He'd actually surprised the World's Greatest Detective. At the next instant, he felt a stab of guilt at his pettiness. Batman was a selfless friend who nightly risked his life for the people of Gotham. This wasn't a contest.

"An informant reported seeing him tonight in the 'Combat Zone.' He was trying to fence some hot merchandise from an earlier robbery." Gordon took a drag from his cigarette. He kept promising Barbara that he'd quit, but so far, he hadn't made a real effort.

"We sent out an 'APB' and about twenty minutes ago, we got a possible confirmation near Gotham Park."

"I heard that you had an officer down."

Gordon nodded. "One of our bicycle units. They reported a suspect that fit his description running through the park's underbrush and said they were in pursuit. Next thing we know, he's got the two officers pinned down. Apparently one's been hit pretty badly and is lying out in the open. His partner says that he can't reach her from his location. The SWAT team hasn't arrived yet, but as soon as it does, I'm deploying them."

"Give me ten minutes," Batman said. "It sounds like Zucco might be getting desperate." Without another word, he was gone...

"Master Dick!" Alfred yelled, stunned. He thought his heart would stop. Mouth open, he stared as Dick literally defied gravity by leaping across the wide chasm in a single bound.

The junior acrobat landed softly on the other side and without a backward glance, continued on his sleepwalk...

Batman moved stealthily, keeping to the shadows afforded by the numerous trees in the large commons. He'd vowed that he would capture Zucco for Dick's sake. AT the Falcone Estate, he'd been too preoccupied with protecting Dick, so that he never had a chance to confront the killer. This time he didn't have any personal distractions to keep him from their inevitable confrontation.

Using the flashlight, Alfred desperately searched for a way to the other side. He couldn't let the young master go on alone. Not in his present state!

The light beam fell on something he'd never seen before. A recess along the cave wall caught his eye. Something different on how the shadows fell. Investigating, he saw what at first looked like another cave tunnel, but then realized it was actually a hidden passageway to the other side.

Following the narrow flashlight beam, Alfred raced to catch up with Dick.

"What could be making him sleepwalk," he wondered out loud. Dick had been troubled with nightmares several times a week since his arrival at the manor. Understandable, as the boy had witnessed his parents' brutal and senseless murder before his eyes.

But he hadn't done any sleepwalking. Alfred had been hoping against hope that because of the growing bond between Bruce and Dick that perhaps the boy was on the road to healing. These actions tonight showed otherwise.

And what about that leap...?

Batman heard the sirens in the distance of the approaching SWAT van. He wasn't worried. It would take them a few minutes to unload and set up. And Gordon would give him the ten minutes he requested.

He hoped it would be enough.

The familiar staccato of automatic gunfire up ahead galvanized him. Arriving at the scene, he took in the situation at a glance. One of the bicycle patrol officers, a female, was down. She was bleeding profusely from multiple chest wounds and appeared unconscious.

Whoever was firing was laying a blanket of hot lead around the downed officer. It was impossible for anyone to reach her. As Batman skirted

the open area, he heard the wounded officer's partner trying to negotiate with the gunman.

"Look! Things will go easier on you if you let me get to my partner. If she dies, then there's nobody and nothing that will be able to help you. You have nowhere to run! The SWAT team will be here in another few minutes. This is suicide! Give up before you injure or kill someone else, or you *yourself* are killed!"

The gunshots were coming from inside a public men's room. It was a small cinder block building with only one way in or out. Batman noted the ventilation windows running along the upper reaches of the wall. Climbing to the roof, he quickly made his way across it.

When he was just above the location from where he'd just seen the shots being fired, Batman leaned over, and taking three pellets from his utility belt tossed them inside.

"One thousand one...one thousand two...one thousand three."

At 'one thousand three' Batman burst into the men's room, shattering the windows. The pellets he'd tossed in had released a quick-acting tear gas that while non-lethal, could incapacitate. Batman's re-breather and night vision goggles allowed him to move easily through the gas screen.

He heard weak coughing at the far corner.

"St-stay away fr-from m-me," the weakened gunman whimpered. Batman kicked the Uzi submachine gun out of the mook's reach. "I-I'm g-gonna be s-sick." At his declaration, he turned and threw up helplessly on the floor. Batman cuffed him and tossed him outside.

Hurrying to where wounded officer lay, Batman stopped. Her partner was holding her to himself, rocking her gently, his closed in grief. She was gone. Batman checked her nametag. Evans. He'd never met her. Never spoken to her. Didn't know what her favorite color was.

All he knew was that she'd been killed by a kid who was no older than fourteen.

Batman whirled towards the boy who still lay cowering where Batman had unceremoniously tossed him. Batman grabbed the blubbering, whimpering kid by the lapels feeling a black rage take hold of him.

"Please, don't hurt me," the boy said. "Please..."

Batman blinked rapidly. What was he doing? He felt the storm within slowly subside. He saw that the boy was wearing the gang colors and insignia of one of the new teen gangs that had recently cropped up within Gotham's blighted inner city.

The kid wasn't Zucco. But in many ways, he was a worse problem...

Alfred saw the eerie glow up ahead. Frightened for Dick he hurried. Arriving at an open cavern, he paused at the entrance, awed by what

he saw before him.

Dick was sitting cross-legged on the floor, gazing at the most exquisite, jewel-like object that Alfred had ever laid eyes on. It seemed to shimmer and glow with an inner pulse in a delightful multitude of rainbow colors.

The strange marvel held Dick enthralled. Alfred wasn't sure if he should put an end to whatever it was doing with Dick, when the object stopped glowing. At the same time, Dick fell back on the floor, asleep...

Chapter Eight

When the Batmobile finally pulled into its hangar, it was almost dawn. Batman had checked several of the leads and tips on Zucco's whereabouts, but none panned out. It was a solemn Bruce Wayne who stepped out of the showers and headed upstairs.

Officer Evans had been a single mom and left behind a four-year-old daughter.

Bruce felt exhausted. So much pain. So much hurt.

"Doesn't God care about us?" Dick's young voice echoed in his head. Bruce shook his head. The answer seemed farther out of his reach tonight than it had in a long time.

Thinking of Dick, Bruce stopped by his room to check on him before he went to bed. He found Alfred reclining on a straight chair pulled next to the bed, dozing fitfully. Walking up to him, Bruce gently laid his hand on the elderly butler's shoulder.

Startled, Alfred's eyes snapped open.

"Is something wrong?" Bruce whispered. Nodding Alfred stood, indicating that he wanted Bruce to follow him.

Outside in the hallway, he spoke in low tones and related Dick's sleepwalking episode. Finally, he arrived at the part where the boy sat mesmerized by the glowing object.

"Whatever is it, Master Bruce?" he asked. Bruce looked away before replying.

"Come on, Alfred," he said. "We need to talk." With that, he led them into the room where the two had shared so many discussions while he'd been growing up-- the kitchen.

Alfred stared at his employer and surrogate son. If Bruce had suddenly done a striptease and started dancing on the kitchen table, Alfred wouldn't have been more stunned.

"An extra-terrestrial?" he spluttered. "Master Dick? But surely, sir, that's preposterous!"

Bruce took a sip of his coffee. When he looked up, Alfred could see the tired lines around his eyes. Lately, he'd been looking much older than his twenty-seven years. Bruce shrugged.

"There are no absolutes in this world Alfred." He smiled briefly. "***You*** taught me that."

Alfred returned the smile warmly.

Shaking his head, Bruce continued.

"I wish that there were some other explanation, but fantastic as it seems, this is the only one that makes sense at the moment. Dick's amazing gifts aren't the result of some kind of mutation. These are abilities that are slowly being manifested in him. The older he gets, the more these--powers--seem to be growing."

"Yes, and practice seems to bring new discoveries." Alfred explained Dick's own surprised discovery of his 'microscopic vision.'

"Exactly," Bruce agreed. "And this 'gravity-defying' power. We don't really know what this capability entails. Remember that if you or I were to go the moon, the lesser gravity there could allow us to suddenly make incredible leaps as well."

"True," Alfred acknowledged.

"So, for the sake of argument," Bruce said, "let's assume that Dick came from a planet whose gravity is much greater than Earth's."

"Then why wouldn't he have shown this ability before? Surely, he or his parents would've made note of it."

"I'm not sure, Alfred," Bruce admitted. "However, because the Graysons were afraid that should someone find out about Dick they could lose him, they basically forbade him from exploring his powers. Dick loved his parents and didn't want to cause them undue pain. Therefore--"

--Therefore, he honored their wishes. Yet--"

--Yet, there were probably times when the gifts manifested themselves by accident," Bruce added. "I would wager that if and when this happened, Dick probably experienced deep feelings of guilt at his perceived 'disobedience,' and maybe--"

--And maybe these feelings of guilt began to work as an unconscious suppression of any new powers that were developing within him."

Bruce looked at Alfred with open admiration.

"Exactly. Therefore, now that we're allowing Dick to openly explore his gifts, so-called 'new' abilities are suddenly appearing. I would guess that he's had these powers all along, but as you say, he suppressed them."

"Then, Master Bruce," Alfred said seriously, "I would also say that

the next few months or so are going to be very interesting, indeed." He stood and made his way around to the kitchen area and began taking out the necessary materials for breakfast.

"And I'll have to agree with you," Bruce said, nodding. He took another sip from his coffee and stared pensively at nothing in particular. "He really is a great kid, isn't he?"

"Yes, Master Bruce. He most certainly is that."

Bruce produced a sheaf of papers and handed them to Alfred. Alfred took them and began reading them. Raising a single eyebrow, he handed them back.

"Are you sure, sir?" he asked.

Bruce nodded. "If *Dick* agrees to it. Child Protection Services may take him away from us otherwise."

Alfred gasped. "Surely *not*, sir!"

Bruce glanced down at the papers, and smiling sadly nodded. "I'm afraid so. Maybe it's too soon to ask him. He loves his parents. And misses them terribly. I don't want to--"

Bruce was interrupted at this moment, when the object of the conversation walked into the kitchen. Rather than a 'strange visitor from another planet,' what entered was a slightly bedraggled-looking, sleepy nine-year-old boy.

Bruce noted the pale cheeks and dark circles under the boy's usually bright blue eyes. Glancing worriedly at Alfred, he addressed Dick.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Glad you could join us."

Dick rubbed his tired eyes and walked up to Bruce. Unselfconsciously, Dick put his arms around Bruce's neck and his head on his shoulder. "My head hurts," he said in a small voice.

"C'mere," Bruce said, picking up the boy and placing him on his lap. "Alfred will take care of that in no time. I think he *invented* headache medicine."

Dick nodded tiredly and snuggled in Bruce's strong arms, his eyes closed. Alfred seemed to conjure two children's aspirins out of thin air. He carefully placed one on Dick's open palm.

"This one first, Master Dick," he said. "Be sure to chew it completely and swallow carefully."

Dick complied by placing it in his mouth and chewing the small tablet until there was nothing left of it. He swallowed as instructed. Alfred handed him the second tablet and Dick repeated the action. Smiling kindly, Alfred then handed the boy a glass of water.

"Now wash it down, young sir."

Taking a drink, Dick again did as told.

"It will take a few minutes before the aspirins take effect, Master Dick. Would you care to return to your room until you're feeling better?"

Dick shook his head. Bruce gave Alfred a half-smile over Dick's head. Leaning down, he spoke to his young ward.

"Would you care for anything? Orange juice maybe?"

Dick nodded. Alfred instantly placed a small glass of orange juice before them. Blinking sleepily, Dick sat up in Bruce's lap and rubbed his eyes.

The morning sun appeared on the horizon. Slowly, its brilliance crept across the white, wintry landscape, chasing away the last of the night. Nature's vista was lost to the occupants of Wayne Manor as her sunlight was caught by glistening icicles softly stirring in the morning breeze and refracted into thousands of miniscule rainbows.

At last, the sun's first rays streamed in through the wide bow windows in the kitchen's breakfast nook, and a bright sunbeam illumined Bruce and Dick. It was going to be a clear, crisp day.

Alfred watched them from his vantage point behind the kitchen island's countertop. Their identical dark heads, haloed by the early morning rays, were almost touching as Bruce leaned forward and picked up the glass of orange juice, handing it to Dick.

Dick took the glass and drank up its contents. The sun's rays backlighting Dick's raven head, Alfred noted that the boy looked much improved. His pale cheeks were now filled with rosy color, and the circles under his eyes were gone. Dick smiled brightly at both Bruce and Alfred.

"Thanks, Alfred," he said. "The headache's gone now. I feel much better." Alfred and Bruce exchanged startled looks. The children's aspirin couldn't have taken effect *this* quickly. Without pausing, Dick added, "I'm hungry. What's for breakfast?"

Bruce sat, chin in hand, staring at Dick's bottomless appetite for Alfred's pancakes.

"You keep eating like that," he said, "I may have to start going into work more often. At this rate, I don't think my net worth will be able to support that appetite of yours."

His mouth full, Dick's eyes laughed. Swallowing, he giggled. "You're funny."

"I think I'll call Lucius today and tell him to set up a special trust fund. We'll call it the 'Keep Dick in Pancakes, Milk, and Cookies' Monetary Fund. What do you think, Alfred?"

Alfred nodded thoughtfully and brought his hand up to his chin. He looked as if he were considering the seriousness of the matter.

"You might consider the wisdom of including chocolate chips," Alfred mused. "Or might I venture, anything chocolate?"

Bruce nodded. "You're right. Think we should buy out Hershey's?" Before Alfred could reply, Bruce turned to Dick. "What do you say, partner? Think Wayne Enterprises needs to go into the chocolate industry?"

"You're both silly," Dick declared, laughing. Growing serious, he turned to Bruce. "Have you ever seen a firebird?"

"A Firebird?" Bruce asked. "Sure. I wanted one when I first got my driver's license, but Alfred insisted young gentlemen who had a perfectly good chauffeur didn't need a muscle car."

"As I recall, sir," Alfred said, "I said that young gentlemen didn't drive crass motorcars that were little more than, as you eloquently put it, 'chick magnets.'"

Dick looked slightly confused and shook his head.

"I don't mean a car. I'm talking about a bird--like fire. You know, all reddish and orange-y and yellowish--a firebird. Or...um, a Flamebird. That's it. That's what it's called, a Flamebird! Have you ever seen one?"

Bruce shook his head. "No, Dick, I can't seem to recall ever seeing one. Do you know its native habitat? Where one could be found?"

"Sounds rather exotic, sir," Alfred said. "Perhaps in the Amazon rain forest?"

Dick shook his head. "No, not there. It lived in a really *cold* place. It was surrounded by glaciers, everything was frozen."

"Tell me more about this place, Dick," Bruce said quietly. "It sounds interesting."

Dick thought momentarily. His eyes taking on a faraway look, and he began to recite.

"The Flamebird lives in a very cold place with a red sky. It's always following a black and blue bird--the Nightwing. I think they're friends, 'cause they're always together. And you can see mountains made of diamonds and cities with buildings taller than anything here."

"Mountains made of diamonds," Bruce murmured. "That's something I'd like to see. Anything else?"

Dick nodded thoughtfully. "It has a red sun and three moons..." Dick looked confused. "Is this from a story? I don't understand. Three moons--?"

"Could it be from a dream?" Bruce asked casually. He glanced quickly over at Alfred. Alfred raised a single eyebrow and nodded slightly.

Dick shook his head and then shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I can't remember."

Bruce gave him a half-smile. "Whatever a 'Flamebird' is, Dick--real or imaginary--I'm sure that it'll come to you in good time. Look, have you finally finished eating us out of house and home?"

Dick grinned, nodding.

"Good! What do you say to an early morning workout down in the Cave? You can show me these new abilities of yours. I can't remember the *last* time I saw someone leap all the way up to the trapeze swings in a single bound...!"

Bruce sat in his study, leaning back on his desk chair, thoughtfully staring out the wide French doors. He could see Dick laughing happily outside. He and Alfred were building a snowman in the fresh-fallen snow.

At one point, Alfred leaned down to pack some more snow onto the base of the snowman. Dick suddenly threw a snowball at the unsuspecting butler. Bruce smiled to himself as he heard Alfred cry out in surprise.

Soon, the elderly gentleman and young boy were having a one-on-one battle. Dick's acrobatics kept him from being hit too often; however, Alfred had closely observed Dick's fighting tactics in the simulator, therefore he was able to anticipate several of the boy's moves.

As Bruce watched, his half-smile disappeared. What was he going to do? How was he going to broach the subject to Dick, not just about being an extra-terrestrial, but about Bruce's wish to adopt him? At first, Bruce wanted to adopt the boy because of his growing fondness for him, and also as a stopgap to keep Child Welfare Services from ever taking Dick away from him.

But now? If Dick *were* an extra-terrestrial, then it became imperative that *no one* else ever be allowed to get their hands on him. Dick's unusual abilities were proving to be formidable.

Bruce thought about the possibility of unscrupulous people ever gaining control of the boy. Imagine what his X-ray vision could do in the wrong hands. Or any of his vision powers for that matter. As well as this 'flying' ability of his.

Bruce thought back to Dick's proud demonstration of his 'jumping' ability. He'd known instantly that Dick was capable of much more than just jumping...

Bruce watched, his expression carefully neutral as Dick *leaped* from floor to cave ceiling in a single hop. On the outside, he appeared calm, almost clinical. On the inside, his guts were churning.

"The kid's *flying*!" he said to himself. No, not possible, he denied. Okay, then, smart guy, he continued. How about a test? Come on. Let's put that sharp intellect of yours to work. *Prove* to

yourself that the kid's *not* flying!

"Okay," he murmured. "I'll *prove* it!"

Dick was smiling and waving from the trapeze swing where he'd settled on the 'down turn.'

"Dick, I have a few exercises that I want you to try, but it's going to take a while to set them up. Why don't go upstairs with Alfred and begin your morning lessons? When I'm ready, I'll get you."

Dick nodded. "Okay, Bruce," he said. Then, standing on the trapeze swing, he called out, "Look!"

Bruce felt a warning cry catch in his throat. Dick executed a series of back somersaults off the trapeze and slowly *floated* back to the floor.

His heart hammering, Bruce didn't know whether to applaud or chew the boy out. He opted for a butt chewing.

"Dick! Did you *know* that you could do that?" he asked sharply.

Eyes wide, Dick shook his head, 'no.' Bruce was about to lambaste into the boy, when he saw the tears threatening to spill. Relenting quickly, Bruce placed his hand on Dick's shoulder. After all, *he* was the one who'd encouraged the boy to spread his wings.

"I'm sorry I yelled, Dick," Bruce apologized. "It's just that this new ability of yours is still a bit of an unknown. We don't really know the top and bottom limits. If something happened to you, I don't think I could forgive myself."

Two huge tears streamed suddenly down Dick's cheeks. His small chin quivered slightly, and then jutted out bravely.

"I-I'm sorry, Bruce. It's just that-that, well, I just wanted to show you. I hadn't done it before, but I just *knew* that I could. I guess I got excited. It was a stupid thing to do. Dad always said we shouldn't try new stunts without a net 'cause we never know what can happen."

Head down, Dick shrugged despondently.

Placing his finger under Dick's chin, Bruce raised it. Man and boy held each other's eyes steadily.

"Hey, none of that," Bruce said quietly, gently wiping Dick's wet cheeks. "We're partners, remember? My job is to watch out for you. And you have to watch out for me. That's what partners do. We take care of each other. I shouldn't have yelled at you. That was wrong. Just like I shouldn't have allowed you to jump up in the first place without a net." Bruce shook his head, giving Dick a small half-grin.

"I guess that we were both wrong. Next time, we'll do better. I promise."

Dick nodded, his eyes smiling up at his guardian. "I promise, too,

Bruce..."

That had been a few hours ago. As Bruce sat and watched Alfred and Dick roll around in the snow, wrestling and laughing helplessly--each trying to put snow down the other's parka--Bruce again went back in his mind's eye.

"Ready, partner?" Bruce smiled inwardly as Dick's head whirled around, his eyes eager with anticipation.

"You *bet*!" he cried, throwing his pencil on the desk.

Bruce held his hand out in a stop motion.

"Uh-uh!" he said. "Nothing doing. Not until you finish whatever homework Alfred gave you. He told me that you have quite a bit to do."

Dick sat back down glumly. "Aw, geez!" he groaned.

"As soon as you're done," Bruce said, from the doorway, "show Alfred your work. When he gives the go-ahead, then we'll continue in the Cave."

"'Kay," Dick said reluctantly.

About a half hour later, Bruce heard Dick bounding down the steps leading from the Manor.

"Bruce!" he called. "I'm finished! Alfred said so!"

"That's great, kid," Bruce answered. He was near the ceiling on one of the numerous catwalks that were strategically placed through out the Batcave. He had several surveillance devices set up there as well as other pieces of instrumentation, which were going to be used while he tested Dick's flying powers.

When Bruce was at floor level with Dick, he and the boy returned to the practice mat. Dick noticed several new apparatuses, some of whose functions he could only guess at.

"Take a seat," Bruce instructed. Dick did as ordered. Bruce joined him, cross-legged. Dick followed suit, crossing his legs. "We're going to begin with a few meditation exercises," Bruce said.

Dick groaned, slapping his forehead. Bruce quirked a single eyebrow and waited patiently. Dick eventually looked up, and seeing Bruce's grim expression, swallowed and sat up straight.

"Let's begin with the first level..." Bruce intoned softly. When he was certain that Dick had achieved the necessary level of receptiveness, Bruce began his quiet instructions.

"Dick, I want you to visualize a bright, sunny, blue sky with white

fluffy clouds..."

Dick's young face was completely relaxed and trusting. He smiled, eyes closed as he saw what Bruce suggested.

"Dick, you want to be a part of those clouds, but you're stuck here on the ground. That makes you feel very sad..."

Dick's face scrunched up a bit, hit by the enormity of never being able to break the bonds that tied him to the Earth.

"But Dick, you're a special boy. Maybe the most special boy in the whole world. You **want** to be part of those clouds, Dick. But more importantly, you **know** that you can **be** part of those clouds..."

Dick nodded fervently.

"Dick, the clouds are so close to you. They're only three feet off the ground." Dick looked around eagerly, and tentatively reached his hand out to touch the nearby clouds.

"And the ground around you is hard and rocky. It's uncomfortable." Dick's expression turned unhappy, again. He moved around as if he were sitting on a rocky surface.

"Dick, you're sleepy." [Dick yawned, sleepily.] "And the clouds look so soft." [Dick looked yearningly in the direction of where Bruce assumed he saw the clouds.] "You want to lie down on them, don't you?" [Dick nodded, sleepily.] "What can you do, Dick?" [Dick shook his head, pouting.]

"I'm tired," he whimpered.

"Son, you can go to sleep as soon as you lie down," Bruce promised. "Look at the clouds. Dick I want you let go of the Earth. Let go of your restraints. Float up to the clouds and lie down, son. Let go, Dick...float up to the clouds."

Dick shook his head, confused. "I can't...I promised, I wouldn't. I promised..."

"Son, I know you gave your word. But your Mom and Dad would approve of this."

Dick looked confused. "But they said not to."

"I know that's what they said, Dick. But things are different now. You need to know what you can do. It's for your own good. And your Mom and Dad only wanted what was best for you."

Dick shook his head emphatically. "No! They made me promise. They wouldn't want me to!"

"Dick, I promise you, son. I would never make you do anything that your parents wouldn't have approved of. I **know** that they'd want you to know how to do this."

"How do you know?" Dick asked suspiciously.

"Because I know that they loved you. And they only wanted the best for you."

"How do you know *that*?" Dick asked uncertainly.

"Because..." Bruce paused, his throat catching. "Because, *I* love you, son. And I only want what's best for you." He had to struggle to get the words out before his natural reticence prevented him from openly admitting his feelings.

Dick's suspicious expression relaxed and was replaced by his natural openness and trust.

Then, before anything more could be said, and still sitting cross-legged, Dick began floating. At about three feet from the ground, he stopped his upward ascent, and just hovered in place. Yawning widely, Dick lay down and went to sleep--three feet above the floor of the Batcave...

The rest of the test was almost a denouement. Once Bruce woke Dick up, he had him 'turn' his power on and off.

Once Dick's fears of disappointing his parents had been removed, he was able to float at will; he no longer had to mask his flying ability as merely "jumping." He could move vertically and horizontally. He could ascend and descend at any angle that Bruce asked him to try.

Bruce had Dick fly through several hoops he'd set up at different heights and angles around the Batcave, first slowly to get a feel for the course, and then faster. As Dick's speed increased, Bruce noted that the boy hadn't yet begun to tap his speed potential...

Watching as Dick and Alfred, finally exhausted from their afternoon activities, began returning to the manor through the kitchen entrance, still laughing and trying to sneak snow down one another's parkas, Bruce decided that an outdoor test would be necessary.

"Probably night time," he murmured. He sighed. Alfred said that the next few months were going to prove interesting. "More like the next few days," Bruce amended.

Chapter Nine

Bruce parked the convertible Porsche on the high bluffs overlooking Gotham City. The locals knew this area as "Lovers' Leap." Legend had it that years ago a young couple, whose families' on-going feud prevented them from ever getting married, ended their lives by leaping together to their deaths on the jagged rocks below.

But Bruce wasn't thinking about star-crossed lovers at the moment. To him this area simply offered the best lighting possible for his purposes.

Although the temperature outside was in the low twenties, he lowered the convertible top. The night sky, like the day, was clear, the air crisp and cold. He kept the motor running, the heater on. Turning to Dick, he smiled down at the shivering boy.

"I promise it won't take long, son," he said. "Here." He pulled a small woolen blanket that he'd asked Alfred to put in the car.

"Thanks," Dick said, taking it gratefully. Even though he was dressed in his heaviest and warmest overcoat, he was still cold. Finally settling down, he looked around. He admired how the lights of Gotham City twinkled in the distance. He'd never known the city was so large.

Somewhere inside himself, however, he knew that he'd seen one larger. And more beautiful. Cleaner. And colder. He felt a momentary stab and yearning for that place.

"The city lights look like stars twinkling," he murmured.

"Yes, they do," Bruce agreed. "But it isn't because of the city that I brought us up here."

Dick turned to him, curious. Seeing Dick's gaze on him, Bruce turned away, suddenly nervous.

How to continue?

Taking a deep breath, Bruce tentatively began. "I brought us up here so that we could talk in private. Just you'n me."

"Not Alfred?" Dick asked, hurt that their faithful friend was excluded.

"Not this time, son," Bruce began, and then seeing Dick's protest begin to form, hurriedly added, "but soon. I promise. Everything we discuss, we'll tell him. Is that fair?"

Reluctantly, Dick nodded.

"Good," Bruce sighed. "Come on, I've got something to show you." Pressing the automatic trunk opener, Bruce got out of the car, with Dick close behind. Bruce quickly unloaded the contents of the trunk and began setting it up on level ground.

"A telescope?" Dick asked.

Bruce nodded. "I wanted to be able to test some of your vision powers unencumbered by the limitations of the Batcave. Furthermore, I wanted you to be able to see for yourself what certain magnifications are. If you can see the star at say the greatest magnification that this small telescope can offer, then I can have you try to increase your own magnification accordingly."

As Bruce finished setting up the telescope, he added under his breath, "I hope."

"Okay, Dick, first off, we're going to look up at the stars without

any kind of aid. Just the naked eye...and *no* telescopic vision!" he added.

Dick grinned good-naturedly and nodded in agreement.

Bruce brought out a detailed map of the North American December night sky. To Dick's delight, the map glowed in the dark. Pointing out the marker star he wanted Dick to focus on, Bruce made sure that Dick felt comfortable with the star's neighbors.

Within seconds, they were both searching the night sky. Bruce found it right away, but didn't say anything, preferring Dick to make his own discoveries.

"There it is, Bruce!" he cried. "I *see* it!"

"Terrific, Dick," Bruce said, kneeling next to the boy. "Show me where."

Proudly, Dick immediately complied. "Great job, kid," Bruce said admiringly. "Okay, now for phase two." Bruce reached inside his jacket and took out a pair of binoculars.

"Keep your eyes on the star, Dick. Don't lose it. Now try it with these. They're already focused to your unaided vision."

Dick nodded, and not taking his eyes off the star, he carefully brought the binoculars up to his eyes. Suddenly, he could see the star even clearer. Plus, he was able to see some fainter pinpricks of light that he hadn't been able to see with the naked eye.

He reported this excitedly to Bruce.

"...And there's a couple of other stars real close to it that I couldn't see before!"

"Very good, Dick," Bruce said. "You're doing very well." Taking Dick by the shoulder, he led him to the telescope. "All right, you've seen the star with the naked eye and with the binoculars. Now, let's see what a top of the line backyard telescope can reveal."

Bruce pulled up a small step stool so that Dick would be able to see easily.

"The telescope is focused on the same star. Take a look."

Dick looked up disappointedly. "But it looks the same as if I didn't have anything."

"I know," Bruce said moving in and adjusting the magnification. "I wanted you to see again how the star looks without any optic aids." Dick nodded in understanding. "Now, I've doubled the magnification of the binoculars. Tell me what you see."

"Whoa!" Dick whispered. "I can see the pinpricks of light a lot clearer now!"

"All right, now let me double the magnification again," Bruce said. "Take a look."

Again, Dick reported a much clearer view. Bruce repeated the steps until they reached the telescope's maximum magnification.

"This is really cool, Bruce," Dick said. He'd completely forgotten that he'd been cold earlier. "Can we do it again tomorrow night?"

Bruce smiled and ruffled the boy's hair.

"We're not done yet. Or, should I say, *you're* not done yet."

Dick looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I want you to picture in your mind the greatest magnification that you saw through the telescope."

Dick nodded.

"Now I want you to turn your telescopic vision on the same star, and see if you can magnify your vision to the same level as the telescope."

Dick's eyes widened, but he looked up eagerly.

"Oh wow..." he whispered. Bruce smiled inwardly. Apparently, this was working.

"Dick, do you remember how when I doubled the magnification, you could see things just that much clearer?" Dick nodded. "I want you double your current magnification."

Dick nodded, staring up as if mesmerized.

"Got it?" Bruce asked. Dick nodded. "Good. Dick, for the final test, I want to zoom in as close as you can to the same star, and see if you can spot any planets revolving around it."

Dick frowned in concentration. This was going to be farther than he had *ever* attempted to see. Focusing on the job at hand, he pictured the star and its placement in the heavens, and suddenly he was *there*.

It felt as if his eyes automatically put heat shields over themselves--a special type of sun block. He could clearly see the star burning in its infinite nuclear furnace, solar flares shooting out to what he instinctively knew were billions of miles.

In a small voice he tried to describe what he saw, but couldn't find adequate words.

"Whoa..." he whispered, awed beyond the ability to articulate what he felt.

"Do you see any planets, chum?" Bruce asked.

Realizing that he hadn't even looked, Dick began a systematic search of the nearby star system. Like Alfred had shown him earlier in his museum search, he divided the system into quadrants. Finally, his vision alighted on an object that was reflecting the star's light.

Zooming in, he cried out in triumph.

"I *see* one, Bruce!" he said, laughing delightedly. "It's all purple and orange-y with fluffy, pinkish clouds!"

Bruce remained outwardly calm. "I want you to use your X-ray vision and see if you can pierce the cloud cover. Can you describe the surface?"

Dick concentrated again. Using his powers in concert was still new enough that he had to take extra time to get them both working together. Finally, he began to zoom in through the atmosphere.

As his vision cut through, he was shocked by the violent storms that were buffeting across the alien sky. It seemed a very inhospitable place. Moving closer to the surface, he saw that it was rocked by massive volcanic action, clouds of noxious gases spewing upward several thousand miles into the planet's atmosphere.

"It's a real scary place, Bruce," he said, describing what he saw. "Can I leave now?"

"Of course, Dick," Bruce said reassuringly. "Do you think you're up to finding another planet? If not, we can go home now."

"I can try," Dick said gamely. Searching again for several minutes, Dick at long last found a second planet, currently revolving on the far side of the star. He'd had to pierce through the massive star in order to see the other side.

"I see one," he reported quietly. "It's prettier than the other one, blue and white."

Bruce stood still. This could be it.

"I'll take a closer look," Dick said. Cutting through the planet's atmosphere, Dick soon saw a great difference between this new planet and its sister. The atmosphere was much more temperate, with light winds and soft fluffy clouds. As he zoomed in he reported what he saw.

"I see oceans," he said, "and little bits of land, like islands."

"Can you see anything else?"

Dick nodded excitedly. "Bruce! I see a bird! It's flying across the island. Let me get closer."

As Dick zoomed in even closer, his excitement grew. Finally, he jumped up, unable to contain himself.

"Bruce! I see a house! No, more like a hut...or a teepee! Bruce! *People* live here! There's *people* living on the planet!"

"Have you seen one," Bruce asked. Dick shook his head, but he still couldn't remain still.

"No, but--" he began, then stopped. "Wait! There's one! Bruce, it's a

human, like you'n me. He's not different or anything."

"Can you describe him?"

Dick nodded. "He looks like a guy in the movies." He shrugged. "You know. With a grass skirt and beads around his neck. Wait--!" Dick saw a little girl come running out of the hut, followed shortly by a woman. The little girl ran around the man. She seemed to be laughing as she ran. The woman looked slightly put out, but the man was guffawing openly. Dick described what he saw, laughing at the antics of the little girl and her mother's obvious frustration.

"Okay, chum," Bruce said quietly. "I think that that's enough for now. It's time to come back down to Earth again."

Dick nodded, blinked, closed his eyes, blinked again, and then looked up at Bruce.

"I never knew that there was life on other planets, Bruce," he said awed. "Dad told me once that he believed that there was life on other planets, but Mom told him that it was silly and not to say such silly things in front of me again. Dad never did."

He shook his head, confused by yet another mysterious, out-of-character behavior from his parents.

Bruce and Dick broke down the telescope and re-stowed it in the trunk of the car. Before they climbed inside for the ride back home, they stood by the driver's side and once more gazed up at the sky.

"Do you **really** not know why your mother said what she said?" Bruce asked.

Dick shook his head. "No, sir, I don't."

"Do you have any idea why your Mom and Dad didn't want you to use your powers openly?"

"Sure, they didn't want anyone to come and take me to the loony bin," he said readily.

"Is that the only reason you can think of?" Bruce asked. By now his eyes were boring into Dick's.

Dick began to nod 'yes' and then changed it to 'no.'

"The powers I have are weird. Different. They put 'different' people in carnival sideshows or in the hospitals or jail. They didn't want me to be hurt or taken away."

Bruce knelt down in front of Dick.

"Dick, that's only partially true. You're right. Your parents did not want you to be taken from them. They loved you more than anything in the world. But there's something they never told you. And I'm afraid that's it time that you learned the truth, the whole truth...and nothing but."

Bruce stood up, and gently placing his hand on Dick's shoulder, he drew the boy into him. As Dick automatically put his arm around his

guardian's waist, Bruce began to talk.

As the story unfolded, Dick felt hot tears of denial spring forward. His small fists pummeled Bruce's waist, his broken-hearted sobs tore at his guardian. Finally, Bruce bent and picked the boy up, allowing him to come to terms with the truth in his own good time.

At last, Dick's sobs stopped, and sniffing he looked up at Bruce.

"Am I a monster, Bruce? Like in The Invasion of the Body Snatchers? Is that why Mom and Dad were ashamed of me? Am I gonna grow up and eat people?"

"With **your** appetite?" Bruce asked. "Who can tell?"

Dick blinked at him, and then broke into a grin. "You're teasing me again," he said.

"Remember the people you saw tonight?" Bruce asked seriously. "The family on the other planet?"

Dick nodded.

"They didn't seem like monsters, did they?"

Dick shook his head.

"They were just people, even though they were on another planet, right?"

Dick nodded reluctantly.

"Dick, I don't care how many powers you have. You're still just a little boy in my eyes. Your parents didn't know what to do about your powers, but rightly or wrongly, their only concern was to protect you. That's why they didn't want anyone to find out about you. They were never ashamed of you. They were scared, like **I** am, that if anyone else ever found out about you, you'd be taken away."

Dick's eyes widened in fear. Bruce sat him on the hood of the car, and ran his hand lightly across the boy's hair.

"Dick, I know it's too early for you to think about this, but it's something that I **have** to ask you. Would you be willing to let me adopt you, fully and legally, so that **no one*...no one** would **ever** be able to take you away from me?"

Where Dick's eyes had been wide with fear before, they were now wide with shock.

"Adopt me?" he said in a small voice. Swallowing, Bruce nodded. "W-Would you be my new Dad? For always?" Again, Bruce nodded. Dick looked away momentarily, overcome by the unexpected request.

Bruce felt a huge hole in the pit of his stomach. He'd hardly considered that it would be possible that the boy wouldn't want him. Bruce finally admitted to himself that he'd grown to love the boy as his own in the short time they'd had together. But if Dick didn't want him, there was no way he'd force him into agreeing to--

"Yes."

Bruce stopped his ruminations. What had Dick just said? He turned to the boy.

"What did you say?"

Dick nodded. "That I really, really want you to be my new dad."

Bruce smiled. Not his usual half-smile, which more often than not seemed to be filled with his own unspoken pain. But an honest, open smile. One filled with true warmth and genuine emotion.

Feeling his own eyes suddenly fill, Bruce picked Dick up again and just held him. Putting him down, he finally spoke.

"Let's go home, son."

Chapter Ten

The next few months whirled by at a dizzying pace. Family Court granted Bruce not just full custody and legal guardianship of Dick, they approved his request for adoption.

Richard John Grayson Wayne walked out proudly from the courthouse flanked by Alfred on one side, and his new father on the other. Dick and Bruce had had a private father/son talk the previous night about the impending adoption. Bruce noticed that something was bothering the boy...

"Dick, what is it?" Bruce asked, looking up from the papers he was working on. Dick had walked into the study and sat down quietly on one of the reading chairs by the bookshelf. "Is something troubling you?"

Dick shook his head at first, but then nodded.

"Am I supposed to call you 'Dad' after tomorrow?" he asked. "It's not that I don't want to, honest, it's just that-that--"

"That there's only one man whom you'll ever be able to call by that name," Bruce finished quietly.

Dick looked mortified at Bruce.

Bruce walked over to where Dick was sitting and perched next to him on the chair's arm.

"Hey, it's okay, partner," he said. "I mean, look at me and Alfred. He's raised me since my parents died. He's been both mother and father to me, and best friend, and--"

"Cook and driver!" Dick piped in.

Bruce smiled slightly. "Yes, but so much more than cook and driver. Alfred loves me," Bruce said. "And you know what?"

Dick nodded solemnly. "You love him," he said simply.

"That's right. 'Sfunny...we've rarely used the 'L' word here while I was growing up, but now, in the short period of time that you've come to live with us, I seem to be saying it all the time." His eyes softened as he looked at Dick.

"It's not that there hasn't been any love here while I was growing up, it's just that--well--" Bruce shrugged, helplessly. "I don't know why. You'll have to help us here, son. Between the three of us, maybe we can try to keep the word from falling into any further disuse."

"I'll do my best," Dick said seriously. "Before we went up on the trapeze prior to a performance, Mom and Dad always said 'I love you' because we never knew if it could be our last--" he stopped, unable to continue.

Bruce brought him in close.

"You're a great kid, Dick. And I'm very proud that you're letting me be your new dad..."

As the days turned to weeks and weeks into months, father and son worked out relentlessly, with Bruce endlessly training Dick so that the boy could one day become his fulltime partner.

And as his training progressed, Dick's powers steadily improved. Within a few months he had almost absolute control of his vision powers. He could see through anything, analyze the molecular and atomic makeup of just about any substance, see farther and deeper into space than the worlds' most powerful telescopes, and heat anything up to the melting point. He could do all this with any substance imaginable, except plain, ordinary lead.

For some reason lead completely negated his vision powers. He couldn't see through it, analyze it, or melt it. Lead was impervious to him.

"Well, at least this makes you a little less of a 'Superboy,'" Bruce said. "Once criminals realize your weakness, we're going to run into safes and other containers that are lead-lined, not to mention whole warehouses. So, we'll just have to keep your vision powers a secret for as long as possible. No need to tell the bad guys about all your fire power."

"Gotcha!" Dick readily agreed.

Flying proved an exceptionally difficult power to control. The tenth time Dick slammed into a stalactite, Bruce forbade him from using his flying powers inside the cave any longer.

"Until you learn complete control," he warned.

"How will I learn to control it, if I can't use it?" Dick asked

reasonably. "I'm the so-called Dark Knight and you're going to be my squire, right?" Bruce asked. Dick nodded uncertainly.

"Okay, you'll learn to fly under nighttime conditions, outside on the Manor grounds. And no speeding! Not until you can control your landings better," Bruce said, and then turning away, he muttered, "All I need is for you to fall and break your neck. Alfred will kill me then!"

Dick grinned at Bruce's retreating back. "But you know that I heal really fast."

"Yeah, but it's the unnecessary cuts and bruises that I want us to avoid."

Dick sighed.

Bruce was even more protective than his mom had ever been. And Alfred? Forget it! Sometimes he was little more than an old nanny. Dick the acrobat--who'd taken his first steps on the high wire and who was developing into one of the most powerful beings on the planet--was being treated like delicate China by his new family members.

Eventually, Bruce made Dick wear a motorcycle helmet for protection, and knee and elbow pads. Furthermore, Dick's 'ground zero' landing zone was a series of stacked air mattresses that could be inflated and deflated within seconds of each other.

"Hollywood stuntmen use this type of platform to perform all of their falls," Bruce explained...

Within a few weeks, Dick's control improved sufficiently so that Bruce reduced the number of air mattresses. However, he refused to allow Dick to remove the protective helmet and pads.

"Last I looked, you weren't invulnerable!" Bruce said.

"But I **look** like a dork!" Dick protested.

"Better a **safe** dork, than a comatose one," Bruce replied without looking up.

Dick crossed his arms and glared at the back of Bruce's neck. He stomped over to the trophy display case and stared unseeingly at the many artifacts that Batman had collected in his crime-fighting career.

One item in particular caught his eye, the tiny spacecraft that had transported him to Earth so long ago. Since the first time that he'd walked in his sleep, called by something within the craft, Dick had never again experienced the same kind of summons.

As the weeks passed, whatever the spacecraft had transmitted to him began to come to him in his dreams. His dreams soon became the source of most breakfast conversations with Bruce and Alfred. By talking about what he'd dreamt, Dick was remembering more about his home planet. And he'd finally been able to give it a name, Krypton.

Dick touched the glass case within which the spacecraft was kept

hermetically sealed. One day, perhaps, Dick would also find the answer to the most important question.

"Why?" he whispered.

Why had he been sent here, alone? Had he been abandoned by his parents, much like he'd heard some newborn babies were left abandoned on doorsteps, or worse, in garbage cans? As always, the question pierced his heart.

As much love as he'd been surrounded with his entire life, sometimes he felt like the loneliest boy in the world. The only one of his kind.

Alone.

Feeling the tears that always seemed to be threatening sting the back of his eyes, he felt a warm hand on his shoulders.

"Whatever the reason, Master Dick," Alfred's soothing voice said quietly, "I just thank God that he brought you to us. You've made us both very happy, young man."

Dick smiled up at Alfred. Much more than cook and driver, Bruce had said. Way more, Dick agreed.

Meanwhile, seemingly oblivious to the little drama being played behind him in the Batcave, but nevertheless quite aware of it, Bruce hunched over his computer and ran a search on a new criminal who was terrorizing the city of Gotham.

So far, he'd committed a string of jewelry store robberies, blown out the vaults of three of Gotham's banks, and stolen a 'Jack-in-the-Box' from a local drive-thru.

In addition to this rather bizarre act of vandalism, he'd also papered the staid edifice of the GCPD Headquarters building with toilet paper, painted Happy Faces on all of the GCPD squad cars, and somehow, he'd disassembled and reassembled Commissioner Gordon's official vehicle inside Gordon's own office.

At this point, the frustrated Gordon called in Batman and asked for his assistance. It took most of Batman's iron self-discipline to keep from laughing, out loud. Instead, he'd listened with his usual grimness as Gordon explained the situation.

It wasn't until later, when Batman returned to where he'd parked the Batmobile, that he discovered that Gordon wasn't the only one who was the victim of someone's idea of a practical joke.

The Batmobile's tires had been slashed.

Bruce remembered the suspect waving jauntily and laughing as he'd made good his escape in a balloon with a Happy Face. The local news media even started calling him, "The Joker."

At first Batman wouldn't have gotten personally involved in this case, because he privately believed the GCPD could easily have handled it. But the Joker's last act of petty vandalism against the Batmobile was the final straw. Besides, the guy had a maniacal laugh

that sent chills down Batman's spine.

"Slash *my* tires," Bruce muttered. "Nobody messes with my car and laughs about it." He heard Dick giggle behind him. Turning, he quirked a sheepish eyebrow at the boy. "Okay, okay, munchkin. Wait'll *you* get your first car. You'll understand."

Of course, now Batman realized that the Joker was anything but! So far his body count was rising. In a new string of robberies, he'd killed a jewelry storeowner, his wife, and a teenaged clerk who'd worked for them on weekends, as well as, two security guards at one of the banks he'd heisted.

It was almost as if now that he had everyone's attention, the Joker wanted everyone to realize that he wasn't just another clown.

Instead, he was proving to be the stuff of nightmares. And that maniacal laugh! Like fingernails scratching a blackboard. Bruce again felt a chill go up and down his spine.

Curiously, in his two final robberies, the Joker had introduced a new element to his crime spree. He'd apparently sprayed, or used some other method of delivery, a strange gaseous mixture that caused his victims to acquire the ghoulisn rictus grin of a corpse. So far, the victims were unconscious and hospitalized at Gotham General, alive, but barely.

Bruce cringed a little guiltily. He'd only entered the case because of his tires, but now--? This "Joker" character was proving to be a formidable criminal. Possibly insane, certainly brilliant. Bruce knew that it would take more than the usual detective work to catch him.

Watching Bruce at work, Dick sighed. He understood his adoptive father's concerns, but really, Dick felt that he had almost complete control of his flying powers now. He didn't pause at the 'almost.' Instead, he took a deep breath, ready to plunge in and restart his argument.

"Nothing doing," Bruce said with finality before Dick could speak. He stood up suddenly, shutting the system down as he started for the uniform vault.

Dick caught a quick glimpse of what the file said, before the system shut. His photographic memory captured the image and information and processed it instantly. He knew where Batman would be going that night.

Batman emerged from the vault and made his way to the Batmobile purposefully. Pausing at the open driver's side door, he looked over at Dick momentarily. Alfred was standing behind the boy, both hands on Dick's shoulders.

Then, as he'd been doing almost every night for the past few months, Batman held his gloved hand up, forefinger and thumb forming an 'L.' Smiling, Dick held his own hand up in the same 'L' sign.

Briefly meeting Alfred's eyes, Batman nodded curtly, and climbed into the Batmobile. He slammed the door shut, powered up the

super-turbocharged engines, and roared into the night.

Dick slowly brought his hand down. Looking at the 'L' shape, he murmured softly to himself, "'L' for 'I love you.'"

Dick took a bite from the last of the chocolate chip cookies that Alfred allowed him to have before bedtime. He followed it with a deep gulp from his milk. Slouching deeper into the large sofa in the family room, Dick found a more comfortable spot and settled down again.

Bedtime was in less than twenty minutes. He wanted to catch the sports news before he went upstairs to brush his teeth. Finally, the local news and weather report were over and Jack Ryder, GNN Sports Reporter, would be next.

Dick was dying to know about the Gotham Knights' game. The Knights were 4-0 so far, and it looked like they were going to be headed to the cellar this season.

As Jack Ryder's handsome face flashed on, he was suddenly interrupted by GNN's news anchor.

"Jack, I'm sorry," Summer Gleason broke in. "We've just received word of breaking news." Gleason turned to the camera, and looking very solemn, she added for the benefit of listeners, "We now go *live* to our reporter on the scene, Stuart McLeod, outside of Goldman and Goldman's Fine Jewelers at the corner of Nineteenth North West and Columbia. Stuart, what do you have for us?"

Dick sat up straighter when he heard the name of the jewelry store.

"Summer," McLeod's excitement was barely contained, "we are right now in the middle of what has turned into a hostage situation. The GCPD has deployed its SWAT team, and as you can see from what's happening--Kyle pan the camera in that direction--" The camera quickly panned and zoomed in on several police officers in riot gear, armed with automatic assault rifles, and in defensive positions around the store.

--As you can see from what's happening, Summer," McLeod continued, "the SWAT team has completely surrounded the store at the moment. We're--"

He was suddenly interrupted by the sharp staccato of automatic fire. The camera panned crazily up and down. Dick could hear the sounds of grunts and yells. Suddenly, the audio and visual pickups were cut off.

The news returned to the studio where Gleason and Ryder were staring unbelievably at the camera. Gleason blinked as if suddenly aware of where she was and began to speak, stumbling only slightly over her prompt cards. Within seconds, the station broke for a commercial.

Dick instantly changed channels. Finally, he found a local 24-hour news channel and waited. About to change channels again, the anchor

looked up seriously and announced "Breaking News."

Dick watched intently as the camera cut to the on-the-scene reporter. The staccato of automatic weapons had stopped. The camera panned in several directions until it found a specific window on the third floor overlooking the street below.

"We believe that the gunman or gunmen is currently holed up in a room off of this window that you're seeing right now," the reporter said in a voiceover.

"Steve," the news anchor back at the station, interrupted. "Do we have any idea of who the gunman might be?"

"No, Walt. There's some speculation being circulated, but it's mostly wild rumor. Some of the GCPD representatives here have said that the gunman could be one of their ten-most wanted, Tony Zucco, or maybe even this new guy, the Joker. But, like I said that's pure speculation." He spoke directly to his cameraman, "Jay, can you pan back to the third floor window?" The camera panned suddenly and refocused on a darkened window near the roof.

"We believe that the shots just fired came from this window," Steve reported. Then excitedly, he added, "We just received word that the GCPD is getting ready to make their move--"

At this moment, the camera caught sight of a dark figure with a black cape swooping across the rooftop.

"What was *that*? Jay, did you catch that? Quick, up there. On the roof!"

Dick had stopped listening. He ran towards his room, taking the stairs two at a time. Zucco? Was Zucco in cahoots with the Joker?

Dick didn't know, but he knew that he couldn't just sit home and wait. He rifled quickly through his chest of drawers and found what he wanted, black sweatpants and a black hooded sweatshirt that Bruce had bought him at Gotham Stadium. The sweatshirt had the Gotham Knights' logo across the chest in dark blue.

Dick dressed quickly, adding a pair of worn sneakers and black gloves to his disguise. He heard footsteps outside his door. Alfred!

Not waiting, the boy stepped outside onto his balcony, and jumping up on the railing, he held his arms straight out on either side of him, then with a soft prayer, he closed his eyes and leaped up into the moonlit night.

End of Part 2 (Continues in Part 3, coming soon!)

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3. (Part 3)

Author: Syl Francis Email: efrancis@earthlink.net Title: Robin, the

Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] Rating: PG Part 3

Summary: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...Robin?! Part 3 contains Chapters 11- 15. Robin, the Boy of Steel, makes his debut. Dick disobeys orders and takes off to help Batman against Zucco and the Joker! Later, Bruce and Dick meet the woman who will change both their lives--Selina Kyle!

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Robin: the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] By Syl Francis

Chapter Eleven

Recalling his lessons in aerodynamics, Dick tried to keep his body as streamlined as possible. The cold night air felt invigorating. His heart was hammering in his chest and although the air was chill, he felt a slow trickle of sweat work its way down his back.

If Bruce found out about this, he'd clip Robin's wings before he *ever* got a chance to take flight. Dick smiled as he flew.

Robin.

That was what his mom used to call him, because as she said, he was the best flyer in the business...

"And because you came into our lives on the first day of spring, little Robin," she'd say...

Dick selected the codename to honor his fallen parents, and Bruce readily approved.

"Robin Hood is one of my childhood heroes," he'd said. "According to legend Robert of Loxley fought for justice against the tyranny of a King John. And because of Robin's leadership the barons eventually forced the king to sign the Magna Carta, which laid the foundation for our own Constitution."

"Indeed, Master Dick," Alfred added. "'Robin' is a fine name with a long and proud lineage. I believe that it means 'bright fame.'"

Dick's chest swelled. "Bright fame," he murmured.

He smiled up at Bruce and Alfred.

Robin. It fit...

As he flew, Dick began searching ahead with his telescopic/X-ray

vision. He was almost there. He could see the lights from the emergency vehicles and media vans. Spotting Goldman's Jewelers, Dick did a long-distance recon.

He found the third-story window that the television reporter pointed out earlier. Piercing the brick and mortar with his formidable vision powers, he saw immediately that the hostages were tied up and lying unmoving on the floor.

Zooming in closer, what he saw almost caused him to lose control and go plummeting several hundred feet to the concrete jungle below. Almost slamming into the Prudential Tower, Dick veered to starboard at the last second and narrowly missed the Gotham landmark.

Seeing an empty balcony on the vast tower, Dick aimed for it, and landed in a tumble. Gasping for breath, the just-turned-ten-on-his-last-birthday junior superhero-in-training felt like he was going to lose the chocolate chip cookies he'd eaten a few minutes earlier.

"Not to mention breakfast, lunch, and dinner," he muttered. "What was *that*?" he asked himself, his eyes wide with shock. "The people...they're all dead." And even though they'd only been dead a few minutes, the horribly contorted expressions on their faces, the wide death grin associated with corpses, had almost sent him into a tailspin.

He knew the hostages were dead because his X-ray/microscopic vision allowed him to see that the hearts were no longer beating. Dick closed his frightened eyes, fighting off the blackness that threatened to overwhelm him.

"That was something I could've skipped," he added ironically. Taking several deep, gulping breaths, Dick shakily calmed himself down.

"Okay, Robin," he muttered. "Or should I call you, Chicken-boy?" he added. "Batman is going after two felons. One of them killed Mom and Dad. Are you going to fly there and give him a hand, or are you going to sit here and cower in fear?"

Dick wiped his brow. He gripped the balcony's iron railing, unconsciously squeezing hard. After a few moments, he felt his heart rate begin to slow down. The sick feeling in his stomach finally settled down, and he was no longer in danger of throwing up. Squaring his shoulders, he released the railing and with new determination, took off his sweatshirt.

Turning it inside out to hide the Gotham Knights' logo, he slipped it on backwards. Lifting the hood to his face, he then burned two eyeholes with his heat vision. Pulling tightly on the strings behind his neck, he tied it securely.

Ready, he took two steps back, placed his arms out on either side of himself, and boldly pushed off the balcony, continuing on his way to the sight of the hostage standoff.

If Dick had happened to look down for a moment, he would have noted the child-sized hand imprints, which unknown to him, he left behind on the balcony's iron railing.

Batman flitted through the shadows of the darkened corridors. He'd donned a full-face mask that was part night vision goggles, part re-breather. If the Joker was here, it was probable that he'd have the strange 'laughing gas' with him.

And Zucco. "You're mine, you sewer rat. Tonight, it ends."

As he moved through the building, he heard the muffled sounds of automatic assault weapons being fired. The distant sounds of panicked screams below told him that the gunman's target was the crowd outside.

Above the screams and weapons fire, Batman heard the high-pitched cackle that seemed to freeze the blood in his veins. The time for discretion was over. He had to move fast.

In an instant, Batman acquired and threw a handful of pellets at the Manager's Office door. The pellets exploded on contact, blowing the door in. Within an eye blink, he tossed in a second handful of pellets. This time, a quick-release gas began to spew into the room.

Following immediately behind the gas pellets, Batman swooped into the cramped office. He saw that several of the gunmen were staggering across the floor as the gas began taking effect. Batman almost did a double take as he noted that they were all wearing smiling clown faces, with big red noses, painted-on red cheeks, and red smiles.

The Uzi sub-machineguns they were brandishing weren't a laughing matter, however.

In a last-ditch effort to get away, two of the clowns came at him, guns blazing. Batman dived, rolled, and somersaulted in mid-air while simultaneously throwing a single Batarang at the clown nearest to him.

As expected, the Batarang struck the gunman on the temple, ricocheted and flew straight to the second clown. Both men went down. Meanwhile, the others had already safely succumbed to the gas pellets.

Checking each carefully, he saw that neither the Joker nor Zucco were amongst them. Hearing a new sound from outside, Batman rushed to the window. Looking up, he saw what looked like a giant-sized Fisher-Price toy helicopter. The cab was painted with a happy clown face and had a huge, three-dimensional red nose sticking out the front.

"How does it stay in the air?" he wondered aloud. Shaking his head, Batman shot a jump line to the roof and rose into the night. As soon as he appeared, fully illuminated in the moonlight, he felt the near-misses of bullets whizzing by him. Looking up, he spotted him--Zucco!

Zucco glared at him through hate-filled eyes, alight with grim laughter.

"You want me, Bats?" Zucco taunted as, quicker than the eye could follow, he ejected the spent magazine and replaced it with a new one. "Eat *this*, hero!"

Locking the bolt back, Zucco trained the sub-machinegun on Batman, and savoring the moment, laughed in triumph as he put his finger around the trigger.

Dick landed on the rooftop of an adjacent building. Batman would never let him be Robin if he allowed himself to be seen. Better to offer whatever help he could from afar, than face being grounded until he was thirty.

Using his X-ray vision, he observed what Batman did inside the Manager's Office. Wide-eyed with hero worship, Dick silently cheered Batman on.

"That's my Dad," he whispered proudly. As often as he'd trained with Bruce in the Batcave, it still came as somewhat of a surprise to see him in action. Even without the wonderful powers that Dick had, Batman took care of business quite efficiently and matter-of-factly.

Watching as his dad swooped up to the rooftop, Dick's heart almost got caught in his throat. Zucco! He was firing at Batman. He was trapped with no place to go. Looking at Zucco with smoldering anger, Dick felt his heat vision simmering just behind his corneas.

About to turn the full-brunt of his wrath on his parents' murderers, Dick blinked suddenly.

A black object flew across his line of vision and struck Zucco on the wrists. Crying out in the pain, the escaped killer dropped the weapon in surprise.

"Owww!" he cried, holding onto his wrist. "You broke it! You broke my wrist!"

"I feel real bad about that, Zucco," Batman growled. He'd reached the roof as soon as he'd disarmed Zucco. Holding the felon by the lapels, he added, "You should feel lucky. I was aiming for your head."

Batman punctuated his sentence by punching out the man who'd brought so much pain to the boy whom he'd grown to love. He quickly clapped a pair of Batcuffs on the killer feeling a sense of satisfaction.

The sound of maniacal laughter behind and above him caused Batman to whirl. The Joker! He'd completely forgotten about him.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I *love* this town!! It's more exciting than New York or Metropolis combined." Pointing at Batman, he added, "And where else can I find someone who's even crazier than *I* am? You should be arrested for wearing your underwear on the outside, you pervert."

Caught in the spotlights of police helicopters, the bright silvery moon, and the glaring neon signs of downtown Gotham City, the purple and green clad Joker was hard to miss. His perpetually painted-on laughing face was beginning to grate on Batman's nerves.

"Who **is** this guy?" Batman muttered. He'd run continuous searches on any known felon who fit the description and modus operandi of the Joker, but had come out empty-handed. If he'd existed before his present incarnation as the "Clown Prince of Crime," there were no records.

Up until last night, Batman had considered Tony Zucco as the more dangerous of the two, because he'd killed before, coldly and with premeditation. But the Dark Knight quickly reassessed his initial evaluation once the Joker introduced his special laughing gas.

Batman analyzed it and discovered that with a sufficient dose, it was actually poisonous. The first few victims had apparently been guinea pigs, as the Joker found just the right dosage to inflict more than just a death-like mask. He could now **cause** death.

The worst part of it was that witnesses who'd seen the gas in action, reported that before succumbing to it, the victims began to laugh uncontrollably, until finally collapsing unmoving, their faces frozen in the macabre death mask.

As the helicopter began to rise higher, the Joker climbed a rope ladder to the cab.

Waving jauntily at the police helicopters hovering nearby, he took out what looked like a small cap pistol. Pointing it at the nearest GCPD chopper, he pulled the trigger.

A tiny flag emerged at the end. Laughing delightedly, the Joker shrugged his shoulders, and then pulled out a much, much bigger gun.

Batman's eyes widened as he saw the Joker pull the impossibly huge weapon from inside his purple jacket. Taking out a grappling gun, Batman aimed at the quickly retreating rope ladder. Simultaneously, as he fired off a jump line, the Joker fired his ridiculous gun.

The deafening explosion that followed seemed to rock the entire city block.

"Rocket launcher!" Batman realized to his shock. The police helicopter exploded in a fireball. As Batman was carried up to the clown-shaped helicopter, he saw **one** police officer fall from the open cargo hatch of the crippled helicopter, but his parachute failed to open.

The officer was probably unconscious from the force of the explosion, Batman thought.

The crowd below screamed and ran in a panic as it was pelted with burning debris from the destroyed chopper.

As Batman was jerked along with the Joker's helicopter, he pulled out

a second grappler, but even he knew that he was too far away to assist the hapless officer who was even now plunging to his sure death...

Watching horrified from the sidelines, Dick was thrown head over heels by the shockwaves of the police helicopter blowing up directly overhead. Momentarily paralyzed, he lay face up on the rooftop as melted slag from above began speeding towards him.

At the same time, he spotted a lone figure that somehow managed to survive the conflagration in the sky.

No parachute! Dick didn't hesitate. Rolling to avoid getting burnt from falling debris, he saw a momentary opening in the descending fire, and flew into it. Instinctively, he used his heat vision to instantly disintegrate the burning metal into harmless sub-microscopic particles.

He did this without thinking, almost without realizing that he *knew* how to do it even seconds prior to doing it.

Without veering off course, Dick flew on an intercept course towards the falling officer. Pouring on the speed, faster than he thought possible, he easily caught the unconscious figure before the officer struck a nearby building.

Glancing down at the pandemonium of screaming, panic-stricken spectators, and police officers hopelessly trying to maintain order, Dick saw a likely spot where he could safely return the fallen officer with minimum risk of being seen.

Floating down to where the EMT vehicles were parked, Dick remained as close as possible to the shadows between the buildings. Landing in an alleyway, he carried the unconscious officer all the way to the nearby sidewalk. Then, taking a moment to right his sweatshirt and pull his hood low over his eyes, he ran to one of the EMTs who was waiting by his vehicle.

"Mister! Mister!" he called. When the medical technician looked up, Dick pointed towards the sidewalk. "Over there, mister! He looks hurt!"

The EMT ran towards the fallen officer and as he did so, Dick ducked into another alleyway, readjusted his sweatshirt again--this was getting old--and lifted off into the night sky.

Batman hung on to the rope ladder. He had to climb onboard the clown-copter and put an end to the Joker's terrorism. This man struck with no rhyme or reason. He just seemed to enjoy causing mayhem in the city. This alone made him one of the most dangerous men Batman had ever tangled with.

As he began climbing to the open hatch, Batman saw a pasty-face, topped with a head of green hair, suddenly peer out. The malevolence behind the laughing eyes chilled his blood.

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!!! We seem to have to a passenger. A flying night-rat." The Joker tsked in mock-consternation. "I *thought* I told that exterminator to check the ladder. Well, if I want the job done right, I suppose I'll have to do it myself."

With that, the Joker reached into the helicopter and pulled out a chainsaw. Yanking at the lanyard, he was rewarded with the heart-warming sound of a 50hp power saw. Calmly humming to himself, the Joker brought the saw down to where the ladder's ropes were connected to the helicopter's hatch and cut one.

Batman felt himself almost slip as he was suddenly buffeted, careening wildly out of control just below the helicopter.

"Say goodnight, Gracie!" the Joker said with a giggle, and bent to cut the next rope. However, before he could, Batman fired off the grappler that he still held in his fist. The line shot towards the Joker, quickly winding itself around his wrists. The Clown Prince instantly dropped the chainsaw, wailing in protest at losing his toy.

"Hey, no fair!" he cried. "That's my favorite power saw. How'm I s'posed to build the little stool that I'd planned for my dear, departed grandmother?"

Batman pulled with a powerful jerk and the Joker tumbled out of the helicopter. Screaming as he fell, the madman looked up with real fear as Batman held him aloft from the weakened rope ladder.

It was Batman's turn to grin. "What do you care? She's dead, isn't she?"

"*No* not dead, you moron!" The Joker shot back, guffawing delightedly at being given an unexpected opening to his punch line. "Just departed...BAWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!! She never *could* take a joke!"

As he said this, the Joker surreptitiously pulled out a tiny pen-laser he kept hidden in his right glove, and before Batman could react, cut his bonds.

Suddenly free, the mad clown prince began plummeting to the ground below.

"*Help meeeeeeeee*!!" he screeched into the night. Horrified, Batman reached his hand out to try to grab the Joker as he fell. About to dive after him, Batman was startled by a billowing, fluffy Happy Face that appeared above the Joker. A parachute!

Laughing gleefully as he floated down, the Joker's taunting voice wafted upwardly in the night breeze. "Made ya loo-oo-ook!"

Closing his eyes, half in relief, half in disappointment, Batman turned to look up at the pilot. He held his thumb upside down, indicating that he wanted him to land. However, he received no acknowledgement from within. Looking out, Batman saw that they were now flying directly over Gotham Bay.

He began to climb up towards the open hatch. As he climbed onboard, Batman yelled at the pilot.

"Land this thing now!"

No reply.

Gritting his teeth, Batman made his way forward. He put his hand on the pilot's shoulder and instantly knew he'd been tricked. The 'pilot' started emitting a recording of the now-familiar, maniacal laughter.

"Sorry, Bats. I thought you'd find it touching to spend your last few moments on this Earth with someone of your own kind...another Dummy! HAHAAHAHAHA!!" The voice giggled for a few more seconds.

"Sometimes I crack myself up...Anyway, as you can see, the helicopter is on auto-pilot and it can't be changed. If you try to take control, it's rigged to blow up. Oh, and it won't be just you who goes up in smoke, but the whole lovely city of Gotham, because I just happened to have an itty-bitty nuclear bomb to play with."

At these last words, a panel opened at the rear end of the helicopter, and Batman saw the device, counting down steadily from the ten-minute mark. Batman immediately made his way to the rear and began inspecting the bomb.

The recording laughed again. "Of course, if you allow the helicopter to fly until it runs out of fuel, well it will *still* explode on impact, but it will blow up safely out at sea." Laughing suddenly, the Joker continued, almost unable to contain his merriment.

"But that wouldn't be any fun would it? And it wouldn't be all that funny, so...Ta-da!" The counter suddenly advanced to the two-minute mark. "You and the good, but boring, people of Gotham now have only two minutes to live, Batman!" He broke into more giggles, snorts and snuffles.

"But, you ask, what about *you*, Joker? Surely you wouldn't place your own life in harms' way? So glad, so very touched, that you care enough to ask. I am, at this very moment, making my way out to the two hundred mile limit in my very own one-Joker sub." He giggled.

"Do you get it, Bats? That's the ultimate punch line! Nobody survives, and I get the last laugh! HAHAAHAHAHA!!!!"

As Batman worked in quiet desperation, he heard the Joker break into song.

"Good-bye, cruel world, I'm off to join the circus...!"

Chapter Twelve

Dick followed at a safe distance. He saw the Joker fall and then safely parachute to a waiting car below. As he tracked the strange felon with his telescopic vision, Dick saw him race towards the waterfront. Still keeping back, Dick saw the Joker board what looked a toy submarine. It was painted a garish purple and green with a red mouth grinning widely on the bow.

Dick rolled his eyes. "Oh, brother," he muttered. Unsure on whether or not he should stop the Joker from escaping, Dick took out a miniature Bat-shaped tracking device from his pocket, and taking careful aim, threw it at the sub.

"Batman says to always be prepared," he quipped.

As the mini-sub was just about to go under, the tracking device adhered itself magnetically to it. Smiling, Dick changed course in mid-flight and sped after the clown helicopter...

Batman took out a palm-sized electronic device and placed the rectangular gadget on the timer. The digital readout seemed to be counting down to zero much faster than conventional seconds. Pressing numbers in a last-ditch act of desperation, Batman punched the pound (#) sign on the miniature key pad.

Stepping back, he watched, eyes narrowed as the LCD screen on his electronic device began to swiftly scroll through millions of numerical combinations in the blink of an eye. Glancing at the nuclear device's clock, Batman felt his blood pound in his head in sync with the countdown: 15 seconds...14...13...

He glared at the LCD screen. It was still scrolling at the speed of thought through hundreds of millions of permutations.

The countdown reached the final ten seconds: 10...9...8...

The LCD screen began to slow. The permutations settled down. Finally, success!

Sweat running down both temples, Batman pressed the star (*) button on the key pad.

Instantaneously, the countdown stopped. Batman was less than an inch from the digital timer. He closed his eyes in silent relief. The clock was flashing 2...2...2...2...

Two seconds to spare. He took a deep, ragged breath.

"Plenty of time," he muttered.

Dick finally spotted the clown helicopter as the first rays of dawn began breaking in the eastern horizon. The calm blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean below reflected the early morning sun. The helicopter was flying low over the water.

Dick stopped in mid-air, hanging uncertainly. What was the problem? Why was Batman flying the helicopter lower and lower into the ocean? Dick's internal odometer told him that they were a good hundred miles out to sea, further than he'd ever flown.

And faster, he thought somewhere in the recesses of his brain.

Why wasn't Batman turning the helicopter around back to the mainland?

A thought occurred to him. What if Batman were injured? Squinting against the rising sun, Dick turned on his X-ray vision to see what was going on.

Batman was kneeling in the back of the helicopter, working diligently at some obviously important task, since he didn't seem to notice that the helicopter was steadily losing altitude.

"Batman, you're gonna crash," he said helplessly. "You've gotta *do* something!" Grimacing sourly, Dick made a decision. "No. *I've* gotta do something! Even if it means I'll never be Robin."

Executing a perfect dive, he zoomed straight towards the open hatch on the side of the helicopter.

With not-quite rock-steady hands, Batman pulled the weapons grade plutonium out of the trigger housing. The plutonium was safely enclosed in lead casing, thus preventing any radiation leak. The nuclear bomb had finally been rendered harmless.

Bringing a slightly shaking arm up to his forehead, the Caped Crusader closed his eyes in relief.

A sudden warning buzzer went off from the cockpit. Batman recognized the sound immediately--imminent impact! There was no time to try to gain altitude. The craft was probably out of fuel anyway. There was only one way left for him-- jump!

Taking a running dive out of the open hatch, Batman cleared the helicopter moments before it crashed into the clear waves below.

"So why am I not falling?" Batman asked rhetorically. Crossing his arms and putting on his sternest look, Batman glanced up. Dick's young face greeted him with a sheepish grin. The boy waved a little timidly.

"'Cause *I* got you?" Dick said unnecessarily. Swallowing nervously, he shrugged and asked, "Where to?"

"Home," Batman growled. Then unable to remain stern-faced with his adopted son, Batman relented and gave him a half-smile. Looking up curiously, he suddenly realized that his ten-year-old son was lugging him across miles of ocean and didn't even seem to be breaking a sweat.

"So how come you can suddenly lift over two hundred pounds, kid? And why do you have your shirt on backwards?" he asked.

Dick looked down from his vantage point. Stopping in mid-flight, he stared open-mouthed at Batman as if realizing for the first time that he had plucked his dad, one-handed, out of the air just as the Dark Knight came flying out of the disabled chopper.

Turning back towards land, Dick answered, "I don't know. Wheaties, maybe?"

"You don't eat Wheaties."

"Oh, yeah. That's right," Dick replied. Alfred didn't allow processed cereal in the house.

"Looks to me like you've just found a new power," Batman said sardonically. "I'm not sure, but I'd wager it has something to do with strength."

"Cool!" Dick said grinning from ear to ear. "I'm finally gonna be able to take you one-on-one."

"I wouldn't bet on it, munchkin," Batman said blandly. Dick's smile immediately disappeared. "And you haven't answered my second question. Why are you wearing your shirt backwards?"

"Uh-oh," Dick muttered.

Busted.

And grounded.

For life. Or close to it anyway. Dick had seen Bruce angry before, but always directed at someone else. Never at him.

"Jeez," he muttered. "Save a guy's life and what does he do? Locks you in your room and throws away the key."

Of course, everyone at Wayne Manor was quite aware that Dick could easily break down any door in the house and end his confinement any time he wished. But Bruce had placed him on his honor.

"On my honor," Dick said ironically, chin in hand. "It's so *not* fair!" He dropped his head on his desk in a huff. He felt it crack slightly under the force of the blow.

"Oops." This 'super-strength' was going to take some getting used to. So far he'd broken five water glasses, destroyed the huge sofa in the family room, and turned one of the antique credenzas into so much splintered firewood.

Dick sighed, recalling Bruce's no nonsense admonishment for disobeying orders and going out without permission. Only after Bruce had thanked him and hugged him, of course, and told him that he loved him. That's when the *other* Bruce took over, the Bruce who was little more than a day-time mask for Batman, the Bruce that only business rivals saw on any given day...

"On your honor, Dick," Bruce began sternly, barely concealed anger seething just below the surface. "You are *not* to leave your room for the rest of the day. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Dick whispered, eyes downcast.

"You are to give me your word that you *will not* disobey *this* order."

Dick looked up and met his dad's dark blue eyes forlornly.

"I promise," he said, his face crestfallen. "I'm sorry, Bruce. Honest--!"

Bruce relented and Dick ran into his arms, hugging his father and crying into his waist.

"I know you are, Dick," Bruce said softly, holding his son to him. "But you *must* understand that certain rules are made for your own protection." Kneeling he held Dick's stricken face in his hand.

"Dick, powers or no powers, you're only a little boy. And we still don't know the full extent of your powers. I can't have you flying around unsupervised at night, possibly getting yourself hurt or worse." He paused and then added, "You did a very brave thing today, probably saved my life. But you were lucky."

"But I did everything you *taught* me--!" Dick began. And things turned out all right he wanted to add.

"You didn't let me finish," Bruce said. "You comported yourself very well and showed me that you *can* control many of your powers now. But Dick, 'luck' is a funny thing. Sometimes it seems that she's always on your side, then suddenly and without warning, she'll kick you in the teeth." Standing up, Bruce ruffled Dick's hair.

"Son, we can't rely on luck to be there for us, only our training. And while you did a lot of things right, you did a lot of things wrong. I'm sorry, Dick, but Robin isn't ready to make his debut yet. You still need to learn to control these new powers that seem to be cropping up every few weeks or so."

"Y-You mean that I-I'm still going to be your partner?" Dick asked hopefully.

"Of course, you are," Bruce said quietly. "I gave you my word didn't I?"

Dick launched himself at his dad once more and sent them both tumbling onto the floor, laughing...

"Come in," Bruce said at the timid knock on his door. Dick cracked the door to the master bedroom, and peered in. Bruce guiltily noted the red-rimmed, wide blue eyes. No one had ever thought to tell him that being a father would be tougher than facing the Joker.

Bruce was reclining on the massive bed, reading legal documents that his secretary had sent him by special courier that day. His expression softened as he watched Dick's forlorn body language. Slapping his hand next to him on the bed, he jerked his head slightly at Dick. "C'mere, kid," he said with a smile.

Dick's demeanor changed instantaneously. His high-pitched, child's laughter brought a warm feeling into Bruce's chest.

Dick automatically flew towards Bruce and expertly twisted in midair, coming to a soft landing next to him. Additionally, he rewarded Bruce with a rib-cracking hug.

"Oof!" Bruce grunted. "Now that's what I call tough love," he said with a soft laugh. "Okay, Dick, you've been in your room all day. Tell me. What did you think about? Anything?"

Dick blinked, confusedly. What did he think about? Bruce didn't ask him to think about anything. Looking away, Dick crossed his arm in childish pique. What was he supposed to say now? What if what he said was held against him and he **never** became Robin?

But Bruce had given his word. He said that Dick **would** be Robin one day. So what did Bruce **want** from him? Sitting up on his knees, Dick faced Bruce visibly upset. He was pouting like a little kid and realizing this, it only made him more upset.

Bruce was completely immersed in his papers and was not paying Dick the slightest bit of attention. Dick felt not a little confused.

~What did you think about? Anything?~

It was just a question. A perfectly simple question, in fact. Kind of in the line of, "What did you do today?"

~What did you think about? Anything?~

The question resonated in his head. What **had** he thought of today? Nothing. And everything.

"I thought about what Mom or Dad would've done," he said in a small voice. Bruce laid his papers aside and gave Dick his undivided attention.

"Go on, son," he said encouragingly.

"I was kinda mad at you," Dick admitted. "I wished that Mom and Dad were still alive because they **never** would've grounded me for what I did." Dick dropped his eyes momentarily and then looked up again. He shook his head.

"But that wasn't true. Dad would've yelled and forbidden me from going up on the trapeze for at least a week. Pop would've paced nervously all week, afraid that Dad wouldn't let me perform for an important matinee. And he and Dad would probably have gotten into shouting matches all week about it, but Dad would've stood his ground." He shrugged.

"On the trapeze Dad's word was law. If I did anything stupid or wasn't giving him a hundred percent attention, then Dad would make me get off. He said that we were the 'Flying Graysons' and not the 'Dick Grayson Show.' If I wanted to do a solo, then he told me once that he'd help me pack my bags."

Dick smiled painfully. "He didn't mean it. About helping me pack, I mean. But it scared me, 'cause one time, he didn't let me perform. Pop was the Ringmaster and he was forced to announce that I had the flu. And you know what? The audience never even missed me." Embarrassed at his antics, yet proud of his parents, Dick added, "Mom and Dad were the best, Bruce. They didn't need me up there with them." He swallowed.

"I was wrong to disobey your orders, Bruce. I acted without thinking 'cause I wanted to get Zucco." He paused momentarily, and then asked tentatively, "Will you forgive me?"

In answer, Bruce held his arms out to him...

Chapter Thirteen

The months seemed to slip by ever faster, gaining speed, until suddenly...

"Happy Birthday, Dick!" Dick grinned from ear to ear and blew out all thirteen candles.

"Congratulations, Dick," Lucius Fox called, holding his glass of punch out in salutation. "Bruce, how're you holding out, now that you're the father of a--"

"TEENAGER!" the crowd of friends called out together. Bruce grimaced in mock horror.

Jim Gordon hugged his teenaged, red-haired daughter to himself and laughed the loudest. "Bruce may have that dark head of hair right now, but give him a month or two. The gray is going to start sprouting out in no time!"

"Oh, Daddy," Barbara protested, laughing. "Come on, Dick. Cut the cake!" Her request was met with resounding approval from the under-fourteen crowd.

"Cut the cake! Cut the cake! Cut the cake!" they chanted.

Bruce and Lucius looked on, smiling. Alfred appeared as if by magic and handed Dick a cake knife. Barbara was instantly next to him holding the pastry server.

"Looks like Dick has good taste in young ladies, Bruce," Lucius teased. Bruce's face went instantly still. Lucius could've sworn that a look of abject terror actually flitted across his boss's face.

"Girls?" Bruce choked.

"The boy has obviously learned a few things from his 'father.'"

Both Bruce and Lucius turned to the sound of the sultry voice. Selina Kyle smiled over her punch-filled wineglass. Dressed in a simple black chiffon dress, with her black hair swept up in a French knot, she looked breath taking. Bruce felt his heart skip a beat.

He caught the faintest whiff of an expensive French perfume.

Recovering instantly, he gave her a cold glare by way of greeting. Lucius, aware of the drop in temperature, beat a discreet retreat.

"Selina," Bruce said curtly. "I don't remember sending you an invitation."

Selina smiled. "Now isn't that funny, Bruce. I don't remember receiving one. You don't mean to tell me that that was deliberate? Why, Bruce, darling, what a perfect faux pas. And here I thought it a mere oversight."

"I heard you got out a few months ago. I didn't think you'd be interested in a child's birthday party."

"You know perfectly well that anything involving *this* particular child interests me--"

They were interrupted by Dick's delighted voice.

"Selina!" he cried happily, coming up to her and giving her a hug. "I didn't know you were in Gotham. Thanks for coming."

Selina tenderly ran her hand through his hair and then held him out by the shoulders at arm's length. To cover her raging emotions, she reached into her pocketbook and held out a bright package. Dick took it and eagerly unwrapped it.

Bruce noted darkly that it was the latest in handheld electronic game boards. He and Alfred had scoured the electronic game stores in town and came up empty-handed. It was no surprise that a woman of Selina's considerable 'talents' would know exactly how to acquire one.

"Whoa! Thanks, Selina--you really shouldn't have," Dick said, hugging her again.

"Don't be silly, Dick. I can't believe that you're really thirteen," she said, shaking her head in awe. "It seems like only yesterday, you were just this high. And look at you now--so tall and handsome. Congratulations, munchkin."

She kissed him affectionately on the cheek.

"Aw, cut it out, Selina," Dick said, blushing at the kiss and her use of the childhood nickname.

"Munchkin?" Barbara teased. She'd walked up to them and had been standing tentatively to the side. Noticing her, Selina raised a single eyebrow. Dick immediately pulled Barbara in by the hand.

"Selina, I want you to meet my best friend, Barbara Gordon. I call her Babs. Babs, this is Selina Kyle, a really special friend of mine and Bruce's."

"A pleasure, Barbara," Selina said sincerely. Bruce moved in.

"Hey, kids," he said with a falsely light tone, "why don't you join your friends outside? I think I overheard Roy and Wally mentioning something about what passes for music and dancing with you youngsters today."

Dick and Barbara laughed at Bruce's doubtful tone and hurried off. As the two young teens ran outside to join their friends by the poolside, Selina sauntered over to Bruce.

"He introduced me as 'a really special friend of--'"

Bruce grabbed her roughly by the wrist and dragged her into an empty study. Slamming the door behind them, he practically threw her across the room. She fell in a heap in the large overstuffed reading chair.

Selina gasped at his violence and cowered for an instant, afraid of him.

"Just what kind of mind games are you playing, Selina?" Bruce asked, his tone menacing.

"I don't know what you mean--" she began.

"Don't **give** me that!" Bruce hissed. "**You** walked out, remember? Left me at the altar like a complete fool!"

Tears welling in her eyes, Selina turned her back to him. Taking out a handkerchief she wiped at her eyes and nose maintaining some modicum of dignity.

"I don't consider begin arrested on false charges and sent to prison for eighteen months as 'walking out,'" she calmly protested.

"False charges?" Bruce asked. "They found the jewels in your suitcase with a plane ticket to Rio. Dent had you dead to rights and you know it."

He didn't add that the GCPD stopped her minutes prior to boarding the plane.

"I only saw you in the courtroom that one day. When you testified. You never even looked at me afterwards," she said accusingly. "You were supposed to be in love with me, but you let a little thing like being arrested come between us."

"A 'little thing'?" Bruce said incredulously. "Selina, you'd been burglarizing the homes and offices of some of my closest friends. You **stole** my mother's pearl necklace--"

--You would've given it to me as wedding present anyway!"

"Yes, but you didn't know that. It was going to be a surprise." Bruce looked away. He remembered Gordon calling on him at Wayne Manor for a surprise consultation. It was his wedding day...

"Jim, what's going on?" Bruce asked, waving his friend into his office. "The wedding is in less than an hour. We're leaving for the cathedral in another few minutes."

Without speaking, Gordon placed a small cosmetic case on the desk and opened it. Bruce gasped involuntarily at the exquisite collection of priceless jewelry inside.

"Can you identify any of these pieces, Bruce?" Gordon asked.

His face devoid of any expression, Bruce pointed out several Wayne family heirlooms, including the single strand of perfectly formed natural pearls, which he'd reported stolen in the previous weeks.

With a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, Bruce carefully closed the cosmetic case and read the gold embossed initials--S.K.--Selina Kyle, his bride- to-be.

And the priceless collection of jewelry that Gordon had just shown him? It was the 'take' from the recent string of burglaries attributed to the infamous cat burglar known as the Catwoman...

"The surprise was on *me*, instead," Bruce said coldly. "And you're right. After my testimony I *couldn't* look at you. What would I have seen except more lies? You did nothing but lie all along. To me...and worse, to Dick." Bruce's face hardened.

Selina looked away in deep pain. Bruce refused to allow it to affect him. Lies. Nothing but lies. That's all she'd ever given him. All she'd given Dick. And in the end, it was Dick who suffered the most.

And that Bruce would *never* forgive.

"Yes, I stayed away," he said. "I didn't want Dick exposed to it. He adored you, Selina. And in spite of everything, he still does. Do you have any idea what your little Cat-capers did to him? He thought you were going to be his new mother, that he'd finally have a mother and father again..."

"Do you recognize this, Mr. Wayne?" District Attorney Harvey Dent's deep timbre echoed throughout the hundred-year-old courtroom. He held out a plastic baggy with a string of perfect white pearls.

Bruce glanced at it and quickly looked away again. He gave a curt nod.

"Please answer the court, Mr. Wayne," Dent said blandly.

"Yes. Yes, I recognize the necklace," he said softly. "It belonged to my mother. My father gave it to her on their wedding day."

"Let the record show," Dent intoned officiously, "that the witness has positively identified People's Exhibit 'B.'"

The judge nodded, signing a legal document, which the Court Reporter handed him.

"No more questions, Mr. Wayne," Dent said, returning to his seat. "Your witness, counselor."

The defense attorney stood up. Bruce recognized him instantly as the same shyster lawyer who'd defended Tony Zucco--Verne Mustacho, currently in the employ of Mario Falcone. Even in this instance, Selina had betrayed him. She knew what Zucco meant to Dick and him.

Before he began his cross-examination, Mustacho picked up the baggy with the pearl necklace and held it out to Bruce.

"Mr. Wayne, you say your father gave these pearls to your mother on the day of their wedding," his oily voice grated on Bruce's nerves.

"Yes."

"Romantic, wouldn't you say, Mr. Wayne?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know," Bruce replied.

"Really?" Mustacho asked, feigning surprise. "Mr. Wayne, isn't it true that you yourself had intended to *give* my client this pearl necklace as a wedding gift?"

Bruce gave Mustacho a cold glare. Glancing at Selina who sat with her head down, Bruce turned back to her attorney.

"Yes," he said. "But--"

"That will be all, Mr. Wayne," Mustacho interrupted. "Your honor, I wish the record to show that since this necklace was intended as a gift for my client, it should be removed from the list of exhibits." He shrugged disarmingly. "A person can't steal what already belongs to them."

"I will take your petition under advisement, Mr. Mustacho," the judge said blandly. "Mr. Dent?"

Dent stood up.

"Mr. Wayne, to the best of your knowledge, was the defendant aware that you intended to present her with the pearl necklace as a wedding gift--?"

"Objection, your honor! This calls for a conclusion on the part of the witness," Mustacho said.

"Objection overruled. You may answer the question, Mr. Wayne."

Bruce glanced back at Selina. She was gazing at him with tear-brimmed emerald eyes. Swallowing, Bruce tore his eyes away from her and refused to look back.

"No. To my knowledge, the defendant was unaware of my intentions," he said steadily. He wanted to add, "To the best of my knowledge, the defendant was unaware of a lot of things," but refrained...

**** In a sudden fit of rage, Bruce picked up a priceless figurine from an accent table and *threw* it against the wall. It shattered into a thousand pieces from the incredible force of the impact.

Selina jumped, startled by his action. Bruce stood breathing raggedly, glaring at the woman who'd broken both his and Dick's hearts.

Bruce had been forced to be strong, for Dick's sake. He'd had to pick up the pieces after Selina's little games had left the boy shattered. And in the end, Bruce's heart had turned to stone.

Then why did it still hurt so much, a small voice asked?

"Why did you come today, Selina? What do you want from us? Haven't you caused enough pain?"

Without looking up, Selina whispered. "I wanted to see Dick. I missed him, Bruce. I didn't know how much you could miss a kid." She risked a glance up at Bruce and winced at his dark glare. "And I missed you, too," she added in a small voice. She dabbed her eyes.

"I know it's over between us, Bruce. I know that I lost whatever chance I had with you, but Dick--" she swallowed, unable to go on. When Bruce didn't say anything, she took a deep breath and plunged in. "And I need your help, Bruce. Please, I'm in serious trouble."

Of course, he thought. Money. That's all she'd ever wanted from him.

Bruce closed his eyes, fighting to calm his shattered nerves. Breathing in and out in slow deliberate gulps, he finally settled his ragged breathing sufficiently to say, "Get out, Selina!"

Without a backward glance, Bruce pivoted and stalked out of the study. Selina slowly stood, and holding her head up, she walked out the way she'd come in, boldly and brashly through the front door.

Long after the guests had left and Dick had gone to bed--visibly disappointed that Selina had left without saying goodbye--Bruce sat alone in the Batcave, remembering...

The happy days, so seemingly long ago. Had it been less than three years? Yes. Soon after Dick's debut as Robin. That's when *she* walked into their lives. And left behind chaos, confusion, and--what?

The pain of what might have been...

The headlines said it all: Robin, the Boy of Steel!

Faster than a 747! [Picture of Robin outpacing a commercial airliner.]

More powerful than a locomotive. [Picture of Robin casually lifting an AMTRAK passenger car.]

Able to achieve escape velocity at a single bound. [Picture of Robin waving at the Shuttle Discovery crew from outside the porthole.]

Robin figuratively exploded into the collective consciousness of the Earth's population. A small boy, barely topping the scales at 4ft, 5in and weighing less than 100 pounds, he became an instant celebrity.

Dressed in a colorful green, red, and yellow costume, Robin was the antithesis of his senior partner and mentor, the dark, enigmatic Batman. Whereas, Batman kept to the shadows and rarely allowed himself to be seen or even photographed, Robin's masked features made the covers of several news magazines. And not a few teenybopper ones.

Bruce shook his head as he remembered the craziness of the period. Little girls all around the world were naming him as the boy they'd most want to go out with on a first date. Moms wanted to hug him and adopt him. Teenaged girls wanted him for a little brother.

And through it all, Dick remained oblivious to the publicity. He was just happy to finally be partnered with his dad.

Together, the Dynamic Duo, as they were now being called, took the criminals of Gotham City by storm.

As often as not, gun-toting crooks suddenly discovered their weapons were too hot to handle and quickly dropped them, or, should they fire a few dozen rounds at Robin, they found out that their bullets only bounced off him...

"Shoot 'im, Rocco! It's that kid. The Bat's brat!"

"Eat *this*, little birdie!"

Batman watched from a nearby rooftop. Let the boy have his fun.

"They'll soon learn," he said to himself.

Robin stood and faced the two mooks without flinching as they opened fire, laughing hysterically. When the smoke cleared, their laughter stopped, choked in their throats.

"I want my mama," one whined fearfully.

"Oh, sh--!" The other one was interrupted in the middle of uttering the expletive.

"Nuh-uh-uh..." Robin chastised, standing over the two suddenly bound and gagged crooks. "I'm just a kid, remember? Batman wouldn't like it if he heard you talking like that in front of me."

On the roof, Batman allowed himself a half-smile. The boy was going to do just fine...

Bruce smiled at the memory. He'd thought that Dick's flying ability, vision powers, and super-strength would be the sum-total of the boy's gifts. Imagine their surprise when they discovered quite by accident that he was also invulnerable...

"This Scarecrow guy is really kinda...well, scary, Bruce," Dick said. He shivered involuntarily, and then glanced quickly at his dad to see if he'd noticed this unconscious display of weakness.

Dick breathed a small sigh of relief. Bruce was completely engrossed in what he was doing. Dick watched as Bruce cautiously measured a green, bubbly chemical from one beaker into another one that held a fluorescent pinkish liquid.

They were both standing over a lab table, wearing lab coats, protective gloves, masks, and goggles. They looked like emergency room workers, Dick thought.

Bruce kept his eyes on the beaker; however, he was aware of his boy's nervousness over the ingredients with which they were experimenting. He and Dick were working with the same dangerous chemicals that the Scarecrow had sprayed over Gotham City to cause violent hallucinations and psychopathic fear.

In order to find an antidote, Bruce was trying to develop the identical combination that Professor Stephen Crane was using on the citizens of Gotham. Crane, known as the Scarecrow, was a psychologist and biochemist, as well as a leading authority in the field of human fear. So far his fear formula had caused ten deaths and several more hospitalizations.

Bruce and Dick had been working on an antidote for the better part of two days and nights. Currently, Bruce was mixing the fourth iteration of the chemical compound that he'd tried that night.

The intercom buzzed.

"Master Bruce, there's a call for you. Commissioner Gordon, sir."

"Thanks, Alfred," Bruce answered without looking up. Finally, satisfied with the new mixture, Bruce put the beaker down and moved towards the door. Pressing the airlock button, Bruce paused at the open door.

"I'll be right back," he said reassuringly. Dick nodded, smiling a little nervously. What could go wrong, he thought? He watched through the lab's transparent titanium steel/lead reinforced walls as Bruce stepped out into the decontamination chamber.

No sooner had the door slid shut behind Bruce, than the new chemical mixture reacted violently and began emitting a poisonous gaseous cloud.

The alarms sounded within the Batcave.

"Bruce!" Dick's frightened voice called from inside the titanium/lead chamber.

"Dick!" Bruce slammed his hands on the sealed airlock door. The entire lab was soon under an opaque mist of fear-inducing chemicals.

"Dick!" Working feverishly, Bruce activated the reverse blowers in the lab to remove the poisonous gas. He could only stand by helplessly as he waited for the lab to clear.

After what seemed an eternity, the atmosphere inside the lab read as "all clear." Bruce immediately opened the airlock door and ran inside. Not knowing what to expect--a superpowered hallucinating being would be extremely dangerous--he entered the lab, fearing the worst.

Instead, he was greeted by a frightened boy who was quite unharmed, and unable to explain why he wasn't climbing the walls in wild-eyed fear...

This was the first indication of Dick's invulnerability. However, because of the obvious physical danger to the boy, Bruce did not try to test the limits of Dick's imperviousness to harm.

It was Gotham City's underworld that was responsible for Robin's nickname as 'the Boy of Steel' due entirely to a most unexpected discovery on the night of his debut: Bullets bounced off his chest.

Bruce shook his head in amazement. Just *bounced* off...

"He ain't *human*!"

"Run, Digger! The Bat-kid's some kind of a supernatural monster!"

"It's like he's made out of steel! Bullets just bounce off him!"

Both men dropped their spent weapons and ran for cover.

Robin, meanwhile, cowered against the brick wall where the two members of the Purple Gang had ambushed him. He checked himself with unsteady hands. His brand new Robin uniform was little worse for wear, dirty from where the bullets had struck, but still intact.

He slid down to a sitting position. He'd done everything wrong. Hadn't even used his X-ray vision to see if they were hiding behind the dumpster. When they emerged with their guns drawn, he'd stood frozen in place, unable to recall how to use his heat vision.

"Some superhero," he whispered. Dick put his head down and let the tears spill momentarily. "You're nothing but a failure, Grayson," he muttered. "They're all gonna call you Chicken-boy now. What's Batman gonna say? Stop blubbering like a baby, you coward!"

He used his black and yellow cape to wipe his tears and blow his nose. Squaring his shoulders, Robin stood.

"Well, even if this is Robin's first and last appearance, he won't go down without a fight!"

Jutting his small chin in grim determination, the junior caped crusader sprayed the area with his X-ray vision. Concentrating for any new sounds around him, Robin was suddenly able to hear every little noise magnified a thousand times. Bringing his fingers up to his ears, he concentrated slightly, and soon gained control of the heightened sense.

Super-vision and super-hearing easily pinpointed the retreating mooks. Leaping straight up, Robin flew in the direction they were headed. Spotting them from above, Robin landed a half block ahead of them.

As they ran past him, Robin called from the shadows.

"What's the hurry, gentlemen?" he asked, emerging into the illumination afforded by the nearby streetlamp. "The party's just getting started."

"It's the kid!" one whimpered in sudden panic.

"Stay away from me," the other pleaded. "Pleeease!"

"I see you boys have met my partner," a voice from above growled.

"It's the *Bat*!" they both screeched, collapsing on the spot. "Don't hurt us, please."

"Yeah, we didn't hurt your kid--See!" The frightened mook pointed at Robin. "H- He's all right. We didn't hurt him...honest! Tell 'im, kid."

Both men fell on each other, blubbering pathetically.

"I think they're ready to cooperate, partner. Why don't you cuff 'em for the GCPD?"

"Yes, sir," Robin said smiling. "With pleasure!"

Bruce had observed the entire incident from the sidelines. Admittedly, he'd been caught off-guard when Robin failed to use his acrobatics to duck the bullets. His heart had almost stopped when he'd first thought that his son was dead. A cold, black rage consumed him.

His fault. *He'd* brought Dick to this.

About to swoop down and take out his anger on the two men, Batman was again caught flat-footed. This time by a still-standing and unharmed Robin.

When Robin slid to a sitting position and put his head in his arms, Batman's first instinct was to go to the boy, but decided instead to let Robin play out the rest of the mini-drama on his own. Robin had to reach his own decisions without Batman's help if he were to

continue as his partner.

Bruce's chest swelled again as he remembered his little boy standing up and going after the two crooks entirely on his own. The boy would certainly do, he thought again.

Within days of Robin's debut, Commissioner Gordon reported that a new criminal was in town, a cat burglar.

And not an ordinary cat burglar either, Bruce recalled, but probably the best that had ever struck in Gotham. Rumors that the burglar might even be a woman began circulating like wildfire around Gotham's high society...

Chapter Fourteen

"Well, hello there."

Dick looked up from where he sat, alone, at the cleared dinner table. He was playing with two six-inch high action figures. A third figure--female--was leaning against a half-empty glass of root beer. With his boy-sized, white dinner jacket, black bowtie, and matching cummerbund, he was the picture of a perfect gentleman.

A wide yawn quickly dispelled the illusion. He covered his mouth in embarrassment.

"'Scuse me," he apologized automatically. Catching sight of the beautiful woman who took a seat next to him, Dick's tired blue eyes perked with sudden interest.

"Hello," he said, shyly.

"Hello. My name's Selina, what's yours?" she asked holding out her hand. Dick shook it politely.

"My name's Dick," he said. "Dick Grayson."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Dick Grayson," Selina said with a smile. Nodding her head towards the crowds of milling adults in various stages of evening dress, she asked with mock seriousness, "So tell me, Dick. What corporation do *you* work for?"

Selina was referring to the many Gotham City companies that were represented that night for the Wayne Foundation's Annual Charity Ball.

Dick giggled and shook his head. "I don't even work yet," he said innocently. "I'm just a kid!"

Selina's emerald eyes smiled warmly. "Really? You're such a handsome gentleman. You certainly had *me* fooled."

Dick blushed furiously. "Awww. You're just teasing me. Like Bruce does all the time."

"Bruce?" Selina asked.

Dick nodded. "My dad." He pointed across the ballroom at the tall, dark-haired, stunningly handsome man dressed in an identically cut white dinner jacket. "That's him over there. Bruce Wayne."

"Of course," Selina said, nodding. "You look just like him," she added with a smile.

Dick's eyes dropped immediately and he shook his head. "No, I look like my mom. Dad always said so." He looked up sadly. "Before they died. Bruce is my dad now, but I don't call him 'Dad,' I call him 'Bruce' on account of his *not* my *real* dad even though I love him like he is and he loves me. Do you really think I look like him?"

Selina blinked at Dick's conversation thread. She mentally kicked herself. Of course the boy was adopted. He introduced himself as Dick *Grayson* and said Bruce *Wayne*--*the* Bruce Wayne--was his father.

I can't believe I said he looked like Wayne, she thought severely. Then realizing the boy had asked her a question and was awaiting her answer opened her mouth to respond.

Glancing back to where Bruce was standing, surrounded by beautiful women, she thoughtfully nodded. Her eyes smiling, she finally answered Dick.

"Yes, Dick. I *really* think you look like your dad."

Dick rewarded her with a wide, beaming smile. Selina relaxed. This was going to be much easier than she'd thought...

"Orange you glad I didn't say banana?" Dick said, laughing almost before he could say the punch line. Selina joined him, delighted by his knock-knock jokes.

"Will someone tell *me* the joke?"

Selina and Dick looked up at the sound of the deep voice behind them.

"Bruce!" Dick cried, happily jumping up from the table. "Is it time to go home, now? I want you meet my new friend, Selina. Isn't she pretty? And she's not married, neither."

"Either," Bruce corrected automatically. At Selina's amused gaze, he stumbled over his words, "Um, I mean, Dick, you used a double negative, son. The correct way to say it is, 'she's not married, either.'"

"Oh," Dick said, confused. "Well, she's not. Don't you think she's pretty?"

By now, Selina's eyes were dancing merrily at Bruce's obvious confusion. Collecting himself, Bruce placed his hands gently on Dick's shoulders, and smiled down at him.

Looking into Selina's eyes, Bruce answered truthfully. "Yes, son. I

think she's very pretty."

It was Selina's turn to blush.

"Good evening," Bruce said pleasantly. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I'm Bruce Wayne. You've already met my son, Dick. He seems to be quite taken with you...Miss--?"

"Kyle, Selina Kyle." Selina held her hand out, and Bruce took it in his. Selina was startled by an instant electric charge that seemed to shoot from her fingertips and up her arm.

Bruce held onto her hand longer than necessary. He was completely captivated by her clear, emerald green eyes. Her close proximity gave the barest hint of perfume. A tug at his jacket brought Bruce back down to Earth. He and Selina dropped their hands as if burnt.

"Bruce, are we going home yet?" Dick asked.

The boy looked exhausted, Bruce thought guiltily. Super-kid or not, it was way past Dick's bedtime. "Hey, c'mere, munchkin," Bruce said, bending down and picking him up.

Dick tiredly laid his head on Bruce's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around his dad's neck and his legs around his waist. Completely charmed by their actions, Selina thought privately that Dick looked like a baby Koala bear.

"I think someone's ready for bed," Bruce said, smiling at Selina. "I shouldn't have kept him out so long," he added, as he checked the table for any items that they might have left.

He picked up two of Dick's Star Wars action figures, Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi. Absentmindedly sticking them in his jacket pocket, he then spotted another one peeking out from under the table. He turned to Selina.

"I'm sorry, would you mind? Kids...it's like traveling with a three ring circus at times."

"Of course not," Selina said reaching for it. Before handing it to Bruce, she looking at it curiously. She gave him a questioning look.

Bruce grinned a bit embarrassed, as he reached for the small toy. "Can't fight an action war without the bad guy. That's Darth Vader, scourge of the republic and evil representative of the Dark Side."

Selina nodded knowingly. "I see." She smiled as Darth Vader joined the others in the pocket of his immaculate dinner jacket. "You seem to have this 'Dad' stuff down fairly pat."

"I'd be inclined to agree with you, except for the small fact that I forgot to line up a sitter for the night. With Alfred out of town and our regular babysitter coming down with a severe case of the flu, I guess I was caught unprepared."

"Sokay, Bruce," Dick mumbled, sleepily. "I'm not tired."

"S'all right, partner," Bruce said reassuringly. "You'll be in bed in no time." Smiling at Selina, he added, "No more wild parties for *him*."

"I suppose that Bruce Wayne can't be a no-show at the Wayne Foundation's Annual Charity Ball?" Selina asked.

"That's about the size of it," Bruce said, beginning to head out. Pausing momentarily, he turned to her. He started to speak, but stopped. Smiling and shrugging simultaneously, he said lamely, "It was a pleasure, Miss Kyle. Have a good evening."

With that Gotham City's most eligible single dad, carried his small bundle out of the Gotham-Hilton's Grand Ballroom.

Long after father and son had disappeared into the elevators, Selina stood where he'd left her, staring at his retreating back.

"Maybe it's not going to be quite as easy as I thought after all," she mused. "Then again--" She fingered a small action figure that she'd lifted, Princess Leia. Picking up her small pocketbook, Selina exited the ballroom through less conventional means...

The lithe shadow moved through the darker recesses afforded by the deep gloom between the skyscrapers. The sharp crack of a whip preceded a sudden swoop across the towers. Landing lightly on the railing of the targeted balcony, she slipped silently through the unlocked sliding glass doors.

She smiled. Too easy. When would these idiots realize that forty stories up was no guarantee of security from a burglary?

Not when the Catwoman was on the prowl.

"Meow," she purred softly. So far she'd been in town a little over a week and had already hit several high-rise apartments and condominiums. She'd cased out the Wayne Foundation's Charity Ball to get an idea of who amongst Gotham's glitterati had something worth stealing.

And, of course, all of those fat society women had proudly provided her with the information she needed by parading their most expensive jewels out in the open. It was all she could do to keep from doing a snatch and run. She'd mingled among the rich, smiling and observing, all the while planning.

She was about to leave the ballroom, when she spotted him, sitting alone at the table. This was better than even she'd planned. Of course, she knew immediately who the boy was. She'd studied his photos and that of his 'father' on the plane trip from Europe.

Her employers had been very thorough. The job was quite simple--kidnap the boy. She'd already received thirty percent of the expected payoff. The rest of the five million would be paid on delivery. She smiled. They could afford to pay her asking price. After all, Wayne was worth billions.

How much would he be willing to shell out for one little boy?

Step one was complete: Meet the boy and his father.

Step two would wait for tomorrow.

Meanwhile, she'd pass the time by stealing all of the lovely jewels that Gotham's society matrons had so kindly put on display for her earlier that evening.

As she moved through the silent rooms, she saw Dick's innocent smile again. At the memory of the little boy, she sensed a twinge of something she didn't fully recognize. Pausing in the middle of the room, Selina cocked her head slightly as if listening.

Shrugging she continued across the room to the locked safe. Purring softly, she easily opened it, and like a little girl in a candy store, helped herself to its bright and glimmering contents.

Later, sitting on a rooftop, overlooking the sleeping city, she finally realized what she'd felt earlier. The tiniest twinge of her long-dormant conscience...

Dick was sleeping soundly by the time Bruce got him home. Carrying him up to his room, Bruce proceeded to undress him and get him ready for bed. Smiling to himself he recalled the first time he'd tried to do this. Somehow Dick's pajamas had ended up backwards.

Bruce really *hadn't* known how difficult being a father was going to be. He'd thought that providing a roof, three meals a day, and a warm place to sleep was just about all there was to it.

He soon discovered that there was much more to being a parent than just providing material things.

As he expertly undressed the sleeping boy, Bruce thought about how Alfred had basically *forced* him to learn to do this...

"I'm afraid, sir, that I *must* insist!" Alfred said firmly. Bruce looked up from the super-computers where he'd been running a search on the Joker. "If you are to be more than a father in name only, then you must learn to *act* like one. Now march! Master Dick's day clothes are even now being wrinkled beyond repair."

Bruce had been so startled by Alfred's tone that he'd immediately gone upstairs. As he'd walked down the hallway to Dick's room, he'd grumbled to himself.

"How hard can it be anyway? Pull off one set of clothes and replace 'em with another set..."

Smiling at the memory, and how he'd botched it the first time, Bruce looked down at his handiwork: "Let's see, pajamas right side out this time. C3PO and R2D2 are both on the front. See, not hard at all," he said softly.

Tucking Dick in, Bruce sat over him for a moment longer. Sleeping, Dick looked even younger than his ten years. Bruce gently brushed a

forelock back.

No, he hadn't known that being a parent was going to be the most difficult job he'd ever undertaken, but having the privilege to watch Dick as he slept peacefully and innocently made everything worthwhile.

"Besides, how many dads can say their kid's the 'Boy of Steel'?"
Leaning down, he whispered softly, "I love you, son. Sleep well..."

The next morning Dick awoke to chaos in the kitchen. Bruce was trying to fix breakfast. Dick stood open-mouthed at the kitchen door looking around at the mess that his bachelor dad had made of Alfred's immaculate empire.

"Alfred's not gonna *like* this," he whispered.

Bruce looked up sheepishly. "I don't suppose you know where Alfred keeps the extra flour do you?"

Dick stared at him wide-eyed. Bruce was totally covered in white. As was every possible square inch in the kitchen: countertops, kitchen table, floor. Even the walls and refrigerator had a faint layer of white residue on them.

Dick nodded wordlessly, pointing to the pantry.

Bruce hurried to the pantry and began searching. Where, he wondered? And how did everything get covered in flour? All he'd wanted to do was fix his son's favorite breakfast, chocolate chip pancakes. He hadn't intended to *wear* the breakfast.

Dick picked his way carefully to the kitchen table. Staring at it momentarily, he quietly took a kitchen towel and began wiping down the surface. Pulling out a chair, he noted that even these hadn't escaped Bruce's dubious culinary prowess.

"Take a guy out of the Batcave..." he muttered.

"What's that, munchkin?" Bruce asked distractedly.

"Nothing. Bruce? Can I help? Alfred showed me how to--"

"Nothing doing! Alfred left me in charge of the meals, remember?"

"He sure did," Dick said under his breath, and then added, "Traitor." Bruce was probably the only person in the whole world who could ruin breakfast, Dick thought bleakly. Maybe he could sneak a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at super-speed?

But no, Dick sighed.

Super-powers weren't allowed upstairs in the Manor. If Dick couldn't perform any given task just like a regular kid, then he wasn't allowed to do it at all. He looked askance at Bruce who at this moment had flipped a pancake into the air. Dick's eyes went up, up,

up. The pancake stuck to the kitchen ceiling.

Bruce should be banned from any and all cooking activities for life, Dick concluded, rolling his eyes. It was going to be a long morning.

The doorbell rang, interrupting the hungry boy's dark thoughts.

"I'll get it," he said.

Bruce nodded distractedly. He was jumping up trying to *whack* the errant pancake off the ceiling. Even Bruce couldn't pull a "Batman" stunt upstairs. Rules were rules.

"How'd that happen?" he wondered, looking up.

"How, indeed," an amused feminine voice said behind him. Bruce stood stock- still. The subtle hint of expensive French perfume wafted into the kitchen, softly caressing him. Selina.

"Look, Bruce!" Dick cried excitedly, holding up a small figure. "Selina found Princess Leia. I thought I'd lost her f'sure."

Bruce greeted their unexpected visitor with a pleased smile. About to speak, he was abruptly silenced as the pancake, just at this moment, decided to let gravity win, and fell directly on the chef's flour-covered head.

Dick and Selina burst into surprised giggles. Bruce looked like he was about to explode, but in the end, he joined them.

"What do you say to breakfast--somewhere else?" he asked.

"Let's go!" Dick yelled. "I'm *starving*!"

"Maybe you'd better let your dad get cleaned up first, Dick," Selina suggested. "Come on, we'll straighten up the kitchen."

"Aw, gee..."

"Hey, that's okay, munchkin," Bruce said, ruffling the boy's hair. "I made the mess. I'll clean it up."

"No, that's okay, Bruce. I don't mind," he said, his tone indicating that he did *indeed* mind.

Bruce smiled. "I'll make it up to you, son. How about breakfast at Gotham's House of Pancakes?"

"Oh, boy!" Dick said. He quickly picked up a kitchen towel and began wiping down countertops.

Bruce smiled at Selina. As he gazed into her beautiful, green eyes, he began to feel warm all over. A man could get lost in those eyes, he thought. Swallowing, he was about to say something, but instead said, "I-I'll be right down."

Selina nodded, feeling a bit dazed herself. What was happening, she wondered as she watched him hurry up the stairs?

Turning to Dick, she felt herself being wracked by conflicting emotions. Snapping back to reality, she quickly grabbed a broom and began sweeping up the fine, powdery mess on the floor. She was here to do a job, she told herself firmly. And nothing was going to interfere with that...

Chapter Fifteen

Selina watched, stunned, as Dick seemed to plow into stack after stack of pancakes.

"Hey, there, partner," Bruce said softly. "Slow down. How about leaving some for the rest of the customers?"

Dick looked up guiltily. He'd forgotten that they weren't at home. Nodding, he swallowed and pushed his empty plate away.

"I'm done," he said.

Bruce smiled warmly over his cup of coffee. "Thank goodness," he teased. "We're already on our third server. The manager's ready to throw us out."

Glancing over at Selina, Dick said, "See, I *told* you he was always teasing me."

Selina nodded. "You sure did," she said.

"When's Alfred coming home?" Dick asked casually.

"Tomorrow," Bruce promised. "He said that his father's estate was finally settled."

"That's good," Dick said with feeling.

Bruce and Selina burst into laughter.

"Does this mean that you haven't been impressed by my cooking?" Bruce asked with mock severity.

Giggling, Dick shook his head.

"C'mere, you!" Bruce said, grabbing his boy and pulling him towards him in the narrow booth. "Just for that, smart guy, *you're* cooking dinner."

Dick laughed. "Good! Maybe now we won't have to call the fire department."

"Oh, is *that* right?" Bruce retorted. "Just wait'll I get you home."

Dick turned to Selina. "Night 'fore last Bruce made dinner, and we had to call the fire dep--"

Bruce clapped his hand instantly over his son's mouth. "Now, now, Dick," he said through clenched teeth. "No need to air our dirty

laundry in public."

His voice muffled by Bruce's hand, Dick protested. Unable to understand what Dick was saying, Bruce finally released him. Dick took a deep breath of fresh air, and then tried to finish what he'd been saying.

"But I wasn't talking about the laundry, Bruce. I was talking about the fire--!"

Bruce clapped his hand over Dick's mouth again. Grimacing, he said quickly, "It's just a saying, kid. Like 'Loose lips sink ships.' It means that there's no need to go blabbing everything. Got it?"

Dick blinked up at him and nodded. Bruce reluctantly removed his hand.

"Sorry about that," he said, not meaning it.

"'Sokay," Dick said. Turning to Selina, he shrugged helplessly.

Selina burst into spontaneous laughter. She'd wordlessly observed their antics through most of breakfast, fascinated by their easy camaraderie and light back and forth bantering.

It was obvious from the boy's digs that Bruce Wayne was not exactly a master chef, nor of much use around the household for even the simplest tasks. And this was the man in charge of one of the largest corporations in the world? He sounded like he couldn't boil water.

Covering her mouth, Selina felt tears streaming down her face. "I'm sorry," she gasped. "But really--I mean, you're Bruce Wayne, famous business mogul and philanthropist. This is a side of you that I never would've expected."

Bruce looked sheepish. "It's not exactly something I'm proud of, Miss Kyle. If it weren't for Alfred, Dick and I would probably starve to death."

"Please, call me Selina," she said. "I've already discovered your deepest, darkest secret, Mr. Wayne. It's too late to be formal."

Bruce and Dick exchanged quick glances at her 'deepest, darkest' comment, and then turned back to her, faces carefully neutral.

"Very well," Bruce agreed, "but only if you call me Bruce."

"Done," Selina said. "Who's 'Alfred' by the way? You mentioned him last night and again just now."

"Alfred's the best!" Dick said with enthusiasm. "He takes care of us."

"Yes, he sure does, doesn't he?" Bruce said affectionately.

"He sounds indispensable," Selina said.

"He is," Bruce said simply. Dick nodded in emphatic agreement.

Changing the subject, Selina asked Bruce, "Are you ever going to ask me why I stopped by your home this morning? I mean, besides to return the lost princess."

"I don't like to talk business when I'm with my son, Selina. I rarely have time with him. When I do, I prefer to keep matters non-business oriented."

"I can well appreciate that," Selina acknowledged with a nod towards Dick. "And I apologize for basically barging in, but--well, I'm trying to get an animal sanctuary started here in Gotham and wanted to ask for your help."

"What kind of animals?" Dick asked eagerly. Selina looked doubtfully at Bruce. At his go-ahead, she smiled at Dick and explained.

"Large cats...lions, tigers, pumas. They're some of the most endangered species on the planet, and, well, you might say that I have a...soft spot...for cats."

Dick nodded seriously. "Mom and Dad told me that giant cats were endangered. Part of the Haly Circus children's matinee always involved a special awareness class given to the kids by our animal trainers."

Dick had Selina's full attention. "That sounds fascinating, Dick. Tell me more..."

"Where to now?" Bruce asked. They'd just climbed into the open-topped Jeep.

"You mean we don't have to go straight home?" Dick asked hopefully.

"Not unless you have a lot of homework you absolutely **want** to finish right now," Bruce said lightly.

"Not **me*!*" Dick said. "Where are you taking us?"

Bruce looked at Selina. "Depends. Do you have somewhere you really need to be, Selina?"

Selina shook her head and echoing Dick said with a laugh, "Not **me*!*"

"In that case," Bruce said, "how about a day of sightseeing?"

"Sounds like fun," Selina said.

"Sightseeing?" Dick asked disappointedly. "But we **live** in Gotham City. What's to see?"

"Hey, are you dissing my hometown?" Bruce asked as they pulled out of

the parking lot.

"Not *me*!" Dick said, laughing...

Several hours later, the threesome was strolling through the botanical gardens in Robinson Park. They each held an ice cream cone and were trying to eat it before it melted in the summer heat.

They'd just spent the past half-hour flying a kite in the shape of the Millennium Falcon. Dick struggled with both kite and string as he tried to lick his ice cream.

Bruce solicitously took both off his hands, sticking the kite string in the front pocket of his jeans and carrying the kite under one arm. Since Dick entered his life, Bruce seemed to be finding more children's toys in his own pockets than he remembered ever having his entire childhood.

He smiled. It was a nice feeling.

"So what do you think of my town now?" Bruce asked.

"I didn't know there was so much to *see*, Bruce!" Dick admitted. "How come we've never done this before?"

Before Bruce could answer, the quiet afternoon was shattered by the sound of automatic gunfire.

"Everybody--*get down*!" Bruce yelled, throwing himself on top of Dick and Selina, forcing them both to the ground.

Risking a look, Bruce saw people scattering for cover, screaming in panic: young mothers with small children in strollers, elderly men who'd been playing chess in the cool shade of the large elm trees just a few minutes before, young couples who'd been enjoying a romantic walk together--innocent people simply out for a day in the park!

"Bruce!" Dick hissed. "Over there! It's *him*!" Bruce turned to where Dick was pointing. An individual in vaguely nondescript clothing and with indistinguishable features stood calmly amongst the terrorized crowd, holding what looked like an ordinary grocery bag.

"It's in the bag," Dick whispered excitedly. "The gun!" Dick's eyes seemed to lose focus as he spoke. Suddenly the man yelped in surprise, dropping the bag and holding his hand as if it'd been burned. Looking around in sudden fear, the suspected gunman took off down the now deserted, wooded pathway.

"Stay down!" Bruce ordered and took off after him.

"Bruce!" Dick yelled, but did as told. Standing orders were explicit, no superpowers where others might see. Bruce was an adult; therefore, no one would think it strange that he went after someone who'd just shot at them. Dick was a kid, therefore, he had to stay put and act like a kid.

Sometimes it was hard being a kid.

But Dick didn't have time to brood because Selina was suddenly sprinting after Bruce.

"Selina!" he cried. "What are you doing?"

Dick lay where Bruce had thrown him for just a moment longer. His small jaw jutting into a grim line, he stood. His father and a nice pretty lady, neither of whom had superpowers, were chasing a mad gunman. And here he was, 'the Boy of Steel,' doing nothing.

"I know I'm gonna get in trouble for this, but I can't let a civilian get hurt," Dick muttered as he, too, ran in the same direction that the others had gone...

Using his X-Ray vision to cut through the dense woods, Dick spotted him almost instantly. He was running towards the zoo area. Dick looked ahead. He felt his blood freeze. There were several school buses that were being unloaded just then near the entrances.

Bruce was about fifty meters behind the guy, and Selina was about a hundred meters further back. Dick would have to work fast--super-fast--to avoid being seen. Lifting into the air, he flew through the trees, an invisible gale-force wind that disturbed the quiet forest only momentarily.

Zooming past Selina and Bruce, he grimaced guiltily as they each stumbled slightly at his passing. The fugitive took something small out of his pocket, and twisting around for an instant, popped off a couple of shots.

Bruce! Dick quickly looked back and breathed a sigh of relief. His dad's superior reflexes had saved him, of course. It would take more than a creep with a gun to take *him* out.

"*No one* fires a gun at my dad!" Dick said in sudden rage. Focusing on a branch immediately above and ahead of the running figure, Dick sliced it with his heat vision. The timing was perfect. As the gunman ran underneath it, it fell suddenly, knocking him to the ground.

Panicking, the man struggled to get it off him as Bruce, almost on him, sprinted to close the gap.

Raising the automatic handgun, the gunman aimed at Bruce and fired. Dick's breath caught in his throat. Concentrating on the gun, he tried to fry it in the guy's hand, but it was if he'd forgotten what to do. Dick was panicking, like the night of his debut.

Through tears, he saw Bruce twist expertly in midair and avoid the shot. Landing on the soft ground, he rolled quickly and came up fighting. A master at hand-to-hand combat and the use of defensive weapons, Bruce picked up and threw a hefty stone straight at his adversary's gun hand.

It struck him with sufficient force to knock the weapon out of his hand. Bruce moved in easily, and within moments had him subdued.

Reaching into his jeans' pocket, he took out the kite string that he'd just minutes prior put in there. Handling the gunman none-too-gently, Bruce soon had him trussed up, the bonds just a little tighter than necessary.

"It's too tight, you moron!" the gunman cried out. "I'll sue! You hear me? I'll sue!"

"You *do* that!" Bruce growled, picking him up by the scruff of the neck. Dick came running up at that moment.

"Bruce!" he cried, throwing his arms around his father. "Are you all right?"

Bruce looked at him knowingly. "Don't give me that innocent look, young man. You and I are gonna have a long talk when we get you home."

Dick dropped his eyes, but then looked up proudly. "You sure showed him," he said.

As they began walking back, dragging the gunman, Dick spotted something lying on the pathway. It looked like a bundle of clothes at first. His eyes widening, he zoomed in with his telescopic vision.

"Selina," he whispered. "*Selina*!" he cried, running to where she lay deathly still.

Bruce dropped his prisoner and ran after his son. They both arrived by her side at the same time. About to check her over, Bruce heard the sounds of pounding feet along the path leading towards them. The GCPD had arrived.

A low moan below them brought a stab of hope. She had a small crease on her forehead where a bullet had grazed her. She began to stir slightly as the GCPD surrounded them.

"Over here!" Bruce said, gently cradling the injured woman. "Selina, can you hear me? Selina?"

A paramedic was suddenly next to them.

"Mister? Please, sir, let me examine her," he said, his voice quietly insistent. Bruce looked up. Both he and Dick had identically dazed expressions on their faces.

Bruce nodded and let the EMT do his job. As he worked on her, Selina's eyes began to flutter open. A quiet moan escaped as she brought a hand up to her head.

Bruce and Dick both hovered nearby. "Selina?" Dick's young voice called worriedly. "Selina, please wake up!"

Finally, they were both rewarded by a pair of beautiful emerald eyes fighting to focus on them. At last, Selina gazed up at them, awake but confused.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Apparently you were very lucky, ma'am," the paramedic stated calmly. "The bullet only creased you. Another quarter inch to the left and--" he left the rest unfinished. "I recommend that we take you to the emergency room where we can get a doctor to check you out."

"No..." Selina protested weakly, shaking her head. "No hospitals. Bruce...please, no hospitals."

Bruce looked at the paramedic. "What if we took her home and had our own physician check her over? Would that be all right?"

The paramedic shrugged. "The cops'll want to question her, and you, of course, since the injury involves a gunshot wound."

Bruce nodded in understanding. "I'll call Commissioner Gordon and give him a statement."

The paramedic looked a little unsure, but then nodded. "I'll give her something for the pain," he said.

"He tied me up!" the gunman was screaming.

"Shut up, ya creep!" the police officer who was leading him away grumbled.

"I know my rights! That's unlawful restraint--!"

"I said, shut up! If you know your rights so well, you oughta know that you shouldn't talk without a lawyer present. Now, do us all a favor and zip it--!"

--I'm gonna *sue* you, you do-gooder," the gunman threatened, as he was dragged past Bruce and the others. "I'll take you for everything you've got! You *hear* me! Everything!"

Bruce looked down at Selina. He thought about how she was lucky to be alive, thought about the hundreds of innocent park goers this man had threatened, about the few unnaturally still bodies who'd never move again. An explosive burning anger suddenly lit inside him.

Guns.

He *hated* them.

And those who used them to hurt the innocent.

Jumping up from where he'd been kneeling next to Selina, Bruce looked as if he were going to punch out the jeering prisoner. He was instantly set upon by two of Gotham's Finest.

"Easy, buddy," one warned. "You're a real hero, Mr. Wayne. Don't make us have to arrest you, sir."

Bruce was breathing heavily, not taking his eyes off the prisoner who was yelling taunts at him even as he was being hauled off. At this moment, Gordon arrived. Taking in everything at a glance, he walked up to them.

Nodding imperceptibly towards Dick who was watching with wide eyes, Gordon spoke in a low tone, "Not in front of Dick, Bruce. Think about

him and what seeing you arrested would do to him."

Glaring at Gordon for a long moment, the fire in Bruce's eyes finally went out. Nodding, he stood still. Gordon looked at his officers and indicated they leave.

"I'll take over," he said. Looking at each other, they wordlessly released Bruce and walked off. Dick rushed up to Bruce and in an instant had thrown his arms around him. Bruce held him to him, feeling the darkness that had threatened to consume him just moments before finally lift.

"That was a very brave thing you did, Bruce," Gordon said. "And extremely foolish. But we'll talk about that later. First, let's take care of this young lady."

She woke to the smell of fresh coffee and the quiet sounds of a household that was just awakening. As she stirred, she suddenly felt a presence in the room with her. Lying still, she waited.

"Is she awake yet, Alfred?" Dick's young voice asked eagerly.

"Not yet, young sir," a new voice answered. She savored the clean melodious tones from the far side of the Atlantic. "Now, go wash up. Breakfast in exactly five minutes, and woe unto he who dares arrive late at **my** table."

This last was uttered in soft affectionate tones. Dick's answering giggle spoke volumes. This 'Alfred' obviously loved the boy and was himself well loved in turn. Smiling, Selina slowly opened her eyes.

She instantly brought her hands up at the unexpectedly bright sunshine streaming in through the drawn curtains. Finally, her eyes adjusted, she tried sitting up. Fighting a moment of vertigo, she waited until it passed.

Selina studied her surroundings. "I think the word I'm looking for is 'understated,'" she muttered to herself. The furnishings, wallpaper, carved ceilings--even the lampshades--bespoke of tasteful understatement. Her expert eyes could even place a price tag on just about everything in the room.

"Not exactly consignment store furnishings," she said ironically.

Bruce Wayne apparently did not surround himself with unnecessary opulence. This was a room that was meant to be lived in, not a museum for displaying one's material wealth.

Noticing a breakfast tray on the nightstand next to the bed, Selina's eyes lit in delight. Someone had prepared a light breakfast for her: coffee, orange juice, toast, fruit, and cereal. The tray was arranged with meticulous care. Even the napkin had been folded with precision. A single red rose in a slender vase greeted her.

A small card propped against the coffee cup caught her eye. Picking it up, she read the contents:

"Don't worry. Alfred fixed the breakfast. I hope you slept well, Bruce. P.S. Make yourself at home. P.S.S. I'll be home shortly after 4:00 p.m."

Smiling to herself, Selina rearranged her pillows and brought the tray up to her. As she chewed on her toast, her eyes kept sliding back to the note on the tray. An unbidden warm feeling slowly suffused her.

"I'll be home shortly after 4:00 p.m."

Shaking her head, Selina chastised herself. "Down, girl. Bruce Wayne's just another mark. Remember that. You're here to do a job. In and out."

Chewing thoughtfully on a spoonful of mixed fruit, she was suddenly flooded by memories of the day before: Dick's eager greeting when he answered the door. Bruce standing in the middle of the kitchen with a pancake on his head. Father and son's easy camaraderie. Their obvious enjoyment of each other's company to the exclusion of all others, even her. Bruce's uncommon bravery in going after the dangerous gunman.

Putting the tray to the side, Selina sat on the bed for a long moment, wondering how she'd gotten herself into this predicament.

"Remember the most important rule," she said severely. "Never get personally involved with the mark. What would Daddy say?"

Annoyed with herself, Selina stood up and walked to the French doors leading to a small balcony. Stepping outside, she breathed in the warm morning air. A well-kept garden on the left announced where the lovely rose on the tray had come from.

Looking out, she spotted a small figure running along the manicured grounds, arms out to either side in imitation of airplane wings. From here she could hear his sweet, childish laughter.

As she watched Dick play, she felt a catch in her throat and a sudden yearning that threatened to overwhelm her.

"You're an idiot, Selina Kyle!" she hissed. "You've fallen love. And not just with one man, but with two--a father *and* his little boy."

She watched with tears beginning to spill as Dick continued on his solo 'airplane flight.'

"What am I going to do now?" she wondered. Even as she asked the question, she blinked, open-mouthed, staring unbelievably as Dick rose lazily in the air and laughing joyously joined a small flock of geese passing overhead...

End of Part 3 (Part 4 coming soon!)

4. (Part 4)

Author: Syl Francis Email: efrancis@earthlink.net Title: Robin, the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] Rating: PG Part 4

Summary: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...Robin?! Part 4 contains Chapters 16- 20. Bruce proposes to Selina. The Catwoman attempts to reform. A new and dangerous player is introduced into the game. And Dick is exposed for the first time to the one substance that can kill him!

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Feedback is welcome!

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Robin: the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale] By Syl Francis

Chapter Sixteen

Stepping out of the shower, towel wrapped around her hair, her slim body lost inside a man-sized bathrobe, Selina noted that her clothes weren't where she'd left them. In their place was a small, folded note.

//Miss Kyle, forgive the intrusion, but I've taken the liberty of sending your clothes out to be cleaned. Also, I've made arrangements with the concierge at your hotel to have all of your clothes and personal belongings brought here. Before you protest, rest assured that we are merely following the doctor's orders. You must have rest for the next few days, and Mr. Wayne insists that you do so as his guest--Alfred//

Selina stared at the note for a moment. All her personal belongings! She wracked her brain trying to remember if she'd locked her cosmetic case. Shaking her head abruptly to put the thought aside inadvertently sent the room spinning around her. Selina instantly stopped the action while she backed onto the bed. She collapsed for a few minutes, waiting for the dizzy spell to pass.

At last, when it didn't look like she'd be thrown off the world through centrifugal force, she stood shakily.

There was no helping it. Even she couldn't physically recall whether she'd locked her cosmetic case, she knew that she would have done it automatically. It was as deeply ingrained in her to be security conscious, as--

She paused.

"--As, I've trained myself to never become emotionally involved with one of my marks," she finished ruefully. Her mind flashed to yesterday in the park as Bruce and Dick laughed while they struggled

to get the _Millennium Falcon_ kite up in the air...

"The tree, Bruce! Look out for the tree!"

"I see it! No sweat--!"

Selina stood with her hands clamped across her mouth as the kite became tangled in the large elm. Bruce immediately ran towards the tree and began climbing.

"Don't worry, son!" Bruce leaped to a lower branch and pulled himself up with practiced ease. He began inching towards where the kite hung entwined.

"There! I've got iiiittt--!"

A branch Bruce had climbed onto as he reached for the kite broke suddenly under his weight. He fell in a jumbled heap of branches and leaves, with the _Millennium Falcon_ gently fluttering to a safe landing on top of him.

"Bruce!" Dick yelled.

As Dick and Selina ran up to him, Bruce sat up slowly. He was wearing a coat of leafy twigs, the kite completely covering his face. As Dick knelt next to him, Bruce blew the kite's tail out of his mouth. He looked up at the others, chagrined.

"See--? I got it," he smiled sheepishly, handing Dick the slightly twisted kite. "Told you not to worry." He grimaced as the kite bent suddenly in half.

Dick carefully took his treasured kite. It would never fly again. He fell back on his heels, disappointed. Bruce looked up at Selina, his face guilt-ridden.

"Dick, I'm really sorry about the _Millennium Falcon_."

"It's okay, Bruce." As if suddenly aware of his father's condition, Dick began to snicker. Finally, he collapsed on top of Bruce in helpless fits of laughter. Before long all three of them were laughing...

Selina smiled warmly at the memory. Abruptly, she grew still. The boy could fly, she thought awed. Dick could fly!

Fingering the robe she had on, she brought her mind back to the problem at hand: her cosmetic case.

Since she couldn't do anything about it, she decided that there was no sense in worrying. Shrugging, she found a pair of overly large slippers and walked out into the hallway. Looking both ways, she spotted a hidden staircase. Following it, she carefully made her way down the steps.

The too-large slippers made descending the stairs a bit treacherous;

therefore, she took her time, placing her feet carefully on each step before proceeding to the next. As she turned a corner to the bottom landing, she heard the sounds of a conversation. As she got closer, she recognized the smooth, cultured tones she'd heard earlier.

--And with a guest in the house, no less. Master Dick, such behavior is unconscionable. What do you have to say for yourself? Well?"

"I'm sorry, Alfred," Dick's small voice replied. "I didn't mean to, honest! It's just that-that...gosh, Alfred, it was such a beautiful morning, and-and, before you know it, the sky was just *calling* me! And the geese were up there, and the clouds--!"

The boy's enthusiastic recitation came to an abrupt halt.

"I'm sorry," he repeated quietly. "I won't do it again. I promise."

"Very well, Master Dick. However, I'm afraid that you haven't heard the last of this. Master Bruce must be informed, and it is *you* who shall have to tell him."

"*Me*?" Dick squeaked.

"You."

"But--"

"End of discussion. Now go upstairs and clean up." Selina heard a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Really, young sir, if you had to go flying with a flock of wild geese, why couldn't you have selected to fly *above* them, rather than below?"

Selina brought her hand up to her mouth in a desperate attempt to keep from laughing out loud. She heard the sound of small feet dragging on the floor and the soft sound of a door swinging open and shut.

Straightening her expression, Selina stepped into the kitchen from the back entrance.

"Hello?" she called. "Anybody here?"

"Miss Kyle!" Alfred said. "You should be in bed. Doctor's orders!" At her bemused expression, Alfred bit back whatever else he was going to say. "Forgive me, miss."

"That's all right," she replied a bit dazed.

Pulling out a chair for her, Alfred waited patiently until she sat down. "How *are* you feeling, Miss Kyle? Dr. Leslie said that that was a bad crease on your forehead. You're a very lucky young woman."

"I'm feeling fine, really," Selina reassured him. "A little dizzy at first, but I'm okay now, Mister--?"

"Please, call me Alfred. I'm Mr. Wayne's gentleman's gentleman."

Although there are times I feel more of a general all-around nanny."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Alfred," Selina said, smiling. "Dick and Bruce spoke quite highly of you. And it's Selina, not Miss Kyle, please."

"As you wish," Alfred acknowledged, walking around the kitchen island to begin preparing the midday meal.

"This place looks a lot cleaner than I remember seeing it last," she said lightly.

Alfred heaved a deep sigh. "Don't tell me. Master Bruce was attempting to cook, I suppose?" At Selina's nod, he rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I'm afraid that Master Bruce's strengths lie in other areas."

Selina smiled at his tact. "Where's Dick," she asked innocently. "Is he in school?"

"The local schools are all on summer break at the moment," Alfred replied. "However, as a general rule, I've been home schooling the young master since he came to live with us."

"Home schooling?" Selina asked. "I'd have thought he'd be enrolled in one of the local exclusive private schools."

"At first, I began tutoring Master Dick as a bit of a necessity," Alfred said. "The local schools were all filled for the term. Also, Master Bruce and I felt that the boy needed a period of adjustment...you understand, to become acquainted with his new home and surroundings. Then, as time went by, I just sort of grew *used* to being his tutor." He smiled fondly. "I'm afraid he's growing much too advanced for my meager educational background. Soon, we'll have to enroll him in a proper school."

"Why do I get the feeling that your 'meager educational background' is probably more extensive than that of some of our so-called educators?"

Alfred beamed at her.

"Master Bruce said that I needed to watch myself around you."

At her look of incomprehension, Alfred added, "He said you're much too charming and would have me wound around your small finger in no time. I see he was right."

Selina blushed at the compliment, but felt secretly pleased. "Bruce said that?"

"Indeed, he did," Alfred replied. The kitchen door burst open at this moment.

"Alfred!" Dick said without preamble. "Selina's gone--!" He stopped. Grinning, Selina gave him a small wave. Dick sheepishly ducked his head.

"Hi," he said, shyly approaching her and tentatively giving her a

hug.

"Of course, when it comes to being 'much too charming' and having people 'wound round one's finger'--here's the absolute champion," Alfred said drolly.

"Huh?" Dick asked.

"Don't you listen to him, Dick. I think you're wonderful just as you are."

Smiling, Dick turned to Alfred. "See, didn't I tell you she was awfully pretty? And she sure smells nice, too."

"Master Dick!" Alfred said, his tone horrified. "A young gentleman simply **does not** comment on how a young lady **smells*!*" Realizing what he'd just said, and worse, how it sounded, Alfred stood, his eyes closed in self-recrimination.

Selina and Dick burst into amused snickers. Selina pulled Dick onto her lap and hugged him close to her.

"You just keep on telling me how nice I smell, munchkin," she said, pressing her cheek next to his.

The whup-whup-whup of the Wayne Enterprises' helicopter could be heard as it came in for its final landing.

"Bruce!" Dick cried, jumping up from the game table where he and Selina had been playing Scrabble. Without a backward glance, Dick ran out into the back portico. He wasn't allowed to approach the landing zone until the helicopter had safely lifted off again.

"Bruce!" he cried, waving madly. Bruce saw him, and giving him a half-smile, waved back. Reaching into the helicopter, he removed his briefcase. Nodding at the pilot, Bruce started walking up the short, winding path to where Dick was impatiently waiting.

As soon as the helicopter lifted off and was safely above the trees, Dick ran out to meet his dad.

"Hey, partner! How's it going?" Bruce asked. "What'd you do all day?"

"I showed Selina around the place," Dick said. "We went horseback riding--she can ride really well, Bruce--and for a swim over by Carson's Creek--she can **swim**, too--and we worked on a puzzle--she's real good at puzzles--and we played Scrabble."

"I hope you didn't tire her out too much, son. Doc Leslie said that Selina's supposed to **rest*!*"

"Awww...she's okay, Bruce. In fact, she's **wonderful*!*"

Bruce smiled down at Dick. "You think so, huh?"

"Sure do! Are you gonna ask her to marry you?" Dick asked in the next

breath.

"Marry--?" Bruce halted, spinning around to face Dick. "Hey, now slow down there a bit, kiddo! Selina and I just met! I mean, you've known her a whole lot longer than I have--at least eight hours longer."

"Yeah, but I'm just a kid," Dick protested. "I can't get married yet."

Bruce chuckled. "No, I suppose you can't." Gazing down at Dick's solemn eyes, Bruce spoke gently. "Tell you what, Dick. Why don't you let Selina and me get to know each other a little better, and then ask me?"

"But how long should I wait before I ask again?" Dick asked. "A week?"

Bruce grinned and shook his head. "Son, some people don't know if they want to get married after a few years." At Dick's look of shock, Bruce bent down until he was eye level with him.

"Dick, I'm afraid that one week isn't enough. And besides, you have to be fair to Selina. I mean she just met us and look at what happened to her. She got shot--some girls would consider that a big turn-off. Next, we invite her to be our guest for a single day, and before she knows what's happening you're making plans to marry her off to me. And don't forget, Selina may already have met someone else. She could even be engaged--"

"She's not!" Dick said with authority. "I *asked* her!"

"You *asked* her--?" Bruce looked stunned. "Why would you--?"

"How else could I find out?" Dick asked curiously.

Shaking his head, Bruce closed his eyes. He'd been mildly taken aback by Dick's ingenuousness, yet he felt slightly pleased to find out that Selina was currently unattached.

She *was* pretty wonderful, he admitted to himself.

Bruce placed his hand behind Dick's neck and pulled the boy in to him until they were touching foreheads.

"Now, no more talk about 'marriage,' okay? If and when I ever decide to marry someone, it'll be on my own good time. But I promise you that you'll be the first to know. Fair enough?" Ruffling Dick's hair, Bruce straightened to his full height.

"Wel-ll," Dick said disappointedly, "I guess...but she sure does smell nice. Just like Mom used to."

At this last comment, Bruce lightly touched Dick's cheek. "Come on, munchkin. Let's see what Alfred's fixed for dinner."

"Good night, Master Dick," Alfred said, quietly shutting the door behind him.

"G'night, Alfred." Dick turned to Bruce who was still sitting on the side of the bed. "I have to tell you something, Bruce. Something I did. Something bad."

Bruce sat, waiting patiently.

"I broke one of the rules today. I know I shouldn't have. That I should be more careful, but--"

"Hey, now. No need to beat yourself, Dick. Just say it straight. It's a lot easier that way."

Dick nodded. Then a small voice, he confessed to having flown outside in the middle of the day, where anyone might have seen him.

"Are you **real** mad at me, Bruce?" he asked.

Bruce shook his head. "No, son, I'm not mad, just disappointed." At Dick's stricken look, Bruce gently combed a lock of hair back on the boy's head.

"We've spoken before about rules, Dick. I know that sometimes you feel like you'll just...I don't know, explode if you can't shout your secret to the whole world."

Dick nodded. "Do **you** ever feel that way?" he asked.

Bruce nodded. "Yeah, sometimes...but I don't, because I know that what I'm doing is important. And necessary."

"I know, Bruce," Dick said. "It's just that sometimes...inside me. I don't know. It's like there's something inside that just needs to **fly**--like the Nightwing and Flamebird that I told you about. I don't know why. Am I really bad, Bruce? Are you gonna ground me?"

"No, Dick, you're not bad. And I'm not going to ground you," Bruce said quietly. "I know that the rules are hard on you, son. But they're necessary at this stage in your life. Maybe when you're older..." Bruce looked away momentarily. "Until then, try to be more discreet. No flying with the local flocks of geese, okay?"

Dick smiled. "Okay." He reached up and hugged his dad. Then, for the very first time since he'd come to live in Wayne Manor, Dick kissed Bruce on the cheek. Lying back on the pillows, Dick smiled and held his hand out in the 'L' sign.

Bruce did likewise.

"Good night, son," Bruce said, turning off the bedside lamp.

"Good night, Dad."

"Is he asleep?" Selina asked. She was sitting in the family room, a framed photo on her lap.

"Yes," Bruce said.

"He's a wonderful boy, Bruce," she said, looking down at the framed photo she was holding. The picture, which had been taken during a community picnic the previous summer, was of father and son running a race with Bruce carrying Dick piggyback. The picture was snapped as laughing they fell across the finish line.

Bruce smiled at the memory.

Looking carefully away, he said casually, "Dick thinks you're pretty wonderful, too." He crossed over to a tray laden with an expensive bottle of champagne chilling in ice. He gave her a questioning look.

"Yes, please."

Nodding, he expertly opened the bottle and poured them each a glass. Walking over to where she sat, Bruce handed her the glass. As she reached for it, her hand lightly touched his.

"And what about you?" she asked huskily. "What do *you* think?"

An electric charged seemed to pass between them. Bruce's dark blue eyes held hers for a long time. Putting both glasses down, Bruce took her hand and slowly brought her up to a standing position. For a seeming eternity they stared into each other's eyes.

"I'm inclined to agree with him," he said finally, pulling her willingly into his arms.

The kiss was sweet, gently exploring, barely touching. Soon, it grew deeper, their hunger intensifying.

As one, they broke apart, each breathing heavily, staring at each other in mutual shock. To cover her confusion, Selina reached for her glass and gulped down most of the contents.

Bruce, meanwhile, had moved to the other side of room, placing as much distance between them as was physically possible. At last, once his heart had stopped hammering in his chest, he spoke.

"I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have--I mean, you're my guest, and--"

--No, don't apologize," Selina interrupted, fighting tears. "It's *my* fault. I don't know what happened. You must think me--I don't know what you must think of me." She looked at him, an almost desperate expression on her face. "You must believe me. This has *never* happened before." She shook her head, knowing that she was explaining it badly. "What I mean is--"

--No, you don't need to explain," Bruce interrupted, crossing back to where she stood, her back to him. He placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "You don't ever have to explain anything to me, Selina." His breath softly caressed her neck. Selina turned abruptly, and once again they faced each other, less than a handsbreadth apart.

Instantly, she was in his arms once more, and Bruce held her as if he'd never let go. Their kiss lingered for infinity, each lost in

emotions that neither had allowed themselves to feel for a long time.

"Bruce, I don't understand what's happening," she whispered, barely getting the words out as his mouth fought to find hers. Unable to continue, and not caring anymore, Selina allowed herself to be carried along into new uncharted waters...

Much later, as she lay in his arms, watching his chest slowly rise and fall in quiet sleep, Selina smiled to herself.

"I'm a fool," she whispered. "But I don't care." Laying her head on his strong shoulder, Selina closed her eyes...

Chapter Seventeen

Three days later Dick woke up feeling excited. He'd become aware of a noticeable difference in Bruce and Selina's relationship in the past couple of days. He'd seen Bruce watching Selina when his dad thought no one was looking and vice versa. One night while on patrol, Batman missed a really easy throw with the Batarang, something Robin had *never* seen him do before.

Smiling happily as he slipped out of bed and hurriedly washed up, Dick quickly got dressed and ran down the hallway to the stairs.

Checking to make sure no one was around, he climbed on the banister and 'flew' down. Without using his powers, he somersaulted as he came off the bottom end and came to a solid, satisfying landing.

"Still got it," he said smugly.

Pushing through the kitchen door, Dick stopped immediately. He could almost *feel* the electricity in the air. Bruce and Selina were already dressed and seated at the table on opposite ends. Each was sipping a cup of coffee.

Dick automatically went to Bruce and hugged him good morning. Bruce held him just little bit longer than usual.

"'Morning, munchkin," he whispered. "Sleep okay?"

Dick nodded bemusedly. "Uh-huh," he said. He turned to Selina. If it were possible, she looked even more beautiful today than yesterday.

"'Morning," he said.

"Good morning, Dick," she replied. Her eyes moved over to Bruce. He was gazing intently at her.

Dick cocked his head to the side. They sure were acting weird, he thought. He was about to shrug it off as grown-up stuff, when Bruce held his hand out to Selina.

"Should we tell him now?" he asked. Smiling at Dick, Selina nodded, yes. "Dick, after you went to bed last night, Selina and I...well, we sort of stayed up and talked, and, well, we've decided--that is, I asked her if she would--"

Dick's eyes and mouth snapped open. He **knew** it. Bruce **did** it!

"You **asked** her!" he cried, jumping up from his chair. He reached over for Bruce and almost sent him toppling. Turning to Selina, Dick demanded excitedly, "Did he? Selina, did he ask you?"

Laughing Selina replied, "Asked me what?"

"If you'll marry us?"

"Us?" Bruce asked. "You mean, marry **me**--?"

"I know exactly what he means, Bruce," Selina said quietly, holding Dick's eyes. "Yes, munchkin. He did."

"And--?" Dick said.

"And--yes!" she cried, holding her arms out to him. "I **will** marry you!"

"All right!" Dick answered. He hugged Bruce once again, and then hurried over to Selina. She grabbed him and pulled him onto her lap.

"Didn't I **tell** you, Bruce? She's **wonderful**!"

"And you were right. Selina **is** pretty wonderful."

Selina looked over at him from above Dick's dark head. Bruce winked at her, toasting her with his morning coffee.

Alfred, not skipping a beat, began serving breakfast. "In honor of this festive occasion, I believe that strawberry French toast is in order. Master Dick, I must insist that you dislodge yourself from poor Miss Selina's lap and take a seat like a proper gentleman."

Dick rose reluctantly. Then turning quickly, he hugged Selina and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I **love** you, Selina," he said fiercely. About to take his seat, he turned to Bruce and gave him the 'L' sign. Smiling, Bruce returned it.

Curious, Selina watched them.

"Can I show her, Bruce?" Dick asked.

Bruce nodded. "Go ahead."

Dick held up his small hand and made an 'L' sign. Bruce followed suit. "No one in the whole world, except us three--me, Bruce, and Alfred--know what this means," Dick said. "Go on. Try it," he urged. Selina did as bidden.

"What does it mean?" she asked curiously.

"It's an 'L,'" Dick explained. "'L' for--"

--'L' for 'I love you,'" Bruce finished.

Selina felt the tears sting the backs of her eyes. Slowly, she held her hand up across the table, 'L'-sign out. Dick's small hand joined hers. And finally, Bruce. They each touched, as if in a silent toast to their new family.

'L' for 'I love you,' Selina wondered. So simple, yet so profound.

"Best man?" Gordon asked shocked. "Who's the lucky girl? Where've you been hiding her?"

"Her name's Selina Kyle, and I assure you, my friend, that *I'm* the lucky one. As for where I've been hiding her...where else except at home?"

"Selina Kyle?" Gordon mused. "Isn't she the young lady who was injured in the park?"

"The same," Bruce said.

"Selina Kyle," Gordon repeated, his tone ironic. "I might have known."

"I don't understand," Bruce said.

"Aren't you the same man who once dated and very nearly became engaged to Vicki Vale and later Silver St. Cloud? What's the matter, Bruce? Can't you find ordinary women named 'Jane' or 'Mary'? Must you always meet beautiful, glamour dolls with little or nothing upstairs?"

"Jim, you barely met Selina. Hardly spoke to her. I assure you that she's much more than just another pretty face. And what's your point anyway?" Bruce asked, offended.

"Bruce, even covered in blood, this Selina is a real looker. Listen, m'boy, you've just *met* her. You don't know anything about her. How can you be rushing into marriage? Have you thought about Dick?"

Not daring to speak for a couple of minutes, Bruce bit back the angry retort he was about to utter. Jim was his friend, and rightly or wrongly, he only had his best interests in mind.

"Dick's crazy about her. In fact, he wanted me to ask her to marry 'us'--as *he* puts it--almost from the start. Jim, I've taken a few missteps in my life. I won't deny that. But believe me, if Dick didn't approve, I wouldn't even consider it. I *love* her, Jim. So does Dick."

Bruce turned his dark, brooding eyes on his friend.

"So, will you do me the honor of being my best man?"

Gordon held the younger man's eyes for a long time. He'd known Thomas and Martha Wayne and had been a friend of the family even before Bruce was born. Gordon worried about the boy. He'd observed his young friend's tortured childhood and his endless string of meaningless relationships.

Most of the women who tried to hook their claws into Bruce were little more than gold diggers, with dollar signs in their eyes. Thankfully, Bruce had rarely developed anything serious with them. Gordon admitted that it was probably due to the young man's astuteness. Bruce was no fool. He undoubtedly knew the score.

Therefore, this whirlwind romance had taken Gordon by surprise.

Holding Bruce's eyes a moment longer, Gordon finally nodded. "All right, Bruce. I'd be honored to be your best man. Thank you for asking me."

Bruce gave his friend a beaming smile. Gordon noted privately that since Dick had come into his life, Bruce seemed to smile more often. Gordon had even heard him laugh a few times. Until today, Gordon thought that Dick was the best thing that had ever happened to Bruce. Maybe Bruce was finally on the road to true happiness.

The two friends shook hands warmly.

"In that case, I'll see you in church," Bruce quipped. "The 'Four Apostles' were literally drawing lots to see who'd do the honors."

"The *who*?" Gordon asked.

"Bishop Mark, Monsignors Matthew and Luke, and Father John," Bruce replied, grinning. "Alfred rather irreverently calls them the 'Four Apostles'--after the Gospels. When I spoke to Bishop Mark yesterday, he called the others over to the office." Bruce smiled ruefully. "They said something about the Cathedral being shaken from its foundations due to one of its more wayward Prodigal sons returning."

Gordon smirked. Bruce had been baptized by Bishop Mark when the bishop had only been a young parish priest. Gordon also remembered Bruce's First Eucharist as well. The Waynes had had a big celebration that day. The following week, they were dead. Sadly, Bruce lost his faith at the same time.

Yes, maybe Bruce was truly on the road to full recovery.

"Just give me the date and time, Bruce," Gordon said with a smile. "I'll be there."

"Saturday at two o'clock," Bruce said. "At Gotham Cathedral. Bishop Mark won--or lost, depending on your point of view--the draw, so he'll be the Presider..."

Long after Bruce had left, Gordon buzzed the intercom.

"Bullock."

"Sergeant, will you come into my office? I have a little job for you."

"On my way, Commish."

Gordon thoughtfully leaned back in his desk chair. "Selina Kyle, I may not know who you are, but once I'm done, I'll know what kind of *lipstick* you prefer *and* the brand of doll you played with when you were a kid..."

The stunningly attractive young woman sat in an outdoor terrace café located on the busy Gotham City wharf. The place, once rundown and seedy, had been renovated recently with government and private funds. Now, it was a bright and cheery major tourist attraction with unique shops, restaurants, and entertainment centers.

It was also a good place to meet anonymously while out in the open.

She was wearing over-sized tinted glasses and a large, wide-brimmed summer hat that obscured her face. She wore a striking, white sundress with spaghetti straps and matching sandals. Her outfit set off her tan to perfection.

Casual observers would later be able to instantly recall a glamorous woman in white; however, their memories would be able to describe only what she'd allowed them to see. Nevertheless, their imaginations would be sparked for years afterward by what they hadn't seen.

A man dressed in black soon joined her. He, too, wore dark glasses, which effectively hid most of his features. Envious male strollers whose eyes were caught by his companion's enigmatic beauty could only sigh in discontent when they glanced over at their own wives or girlfriends.

Neither spoke in voices that carried beyond to the next table. Neither said much of anything, in fact. She quietly sipped a glass of imported water, while he opted for straight scotch.

Finally, he pushed a small piece of paper across the table to her. She caught his wrist, and--this a busboy later reported--the gentleman winced in what appeared to be pain. Smiling politely, she pushed the paper back and rose.

"You won't get away with this," he said in an undertone.

Smiling, she practically purred in reply, "But, darling, I already have." With that she left, feeling a heavy burden slipping off her shoulders.

As she turned the corner, her disgruntled companion watched as she was joined by a dignified older gentleman and a little boy who happily ran into her arms.

Another pair of eyes observed their interplay. As soon as both the man in black and woman in white left their outdoor table, the rumpled, overweight man lifted the glasses they'd left behind, careful not to smudge any possible prints.

He then followed the man in the black, trailing behind at a safe distance...

Three quarters of an hour later, Bullock let his breath out in a hiss.

"So *that's* it," he said. He was parked about 200 yards from the entrance gates to the Falcone estate. "The Commish is gonna love *this*!"

"I have to, Bruce," Selina said. Her eyes were sparkling emeralds in the moonlight. They were standing outside in the Wayne Manor sculptured gardens. "I mean, a girl's gotta have *some* privacy as her wedding day approaches. Bad luck for the groom to see her and all."

Bruce smiled down at her. He took her in his arms, marveling at how much he loved how she felt. He breathed in her scent, a subtle hint of expensive French perfume. Dick was right. She *did* smell nice.

The more time he spent with Selina, the more things Bruce discovered to love about her. So far, he decided that he loved everything he'd found. And each new day brought a new discovery. Bruce didn't know if he'd be able to stand being apart from her for five minutes, much less a few days.

Leaning down, he whispered huskily in her ear. "I don't believe in luck," he said, his breath hot behind her ear and sending shivers down her spine. He kissed her on the curve of her neck, then her cheeks, her eyes, and finally her mouth. They clung to each other for a long desperate moment as they had the first time.

Reluctantly breaking away, Selina looked up him, yearningly. She shook her head. "Oh, no, you don't. My mind's made up. I've already gotten a suite at the Gotham Regency," she said with a smile, holding out her room key. "My bags are packed and loaded in the car. Alfred has generously agreed to drive me."

She swallowed, and then gazed at him with new determination.

"It's better this way, Bruce. Especially because of Dick. I don't ever want him to think that--" she stopped, and looked down blushing.

Smiling, Bruce lifted her chin tenderly. "Okay, if that's what you really want." He smiled ruefully. "Saturday will seem years away, however."

Hugging him tightly, Selina buried her face in his chest. "Bruce, I've never been so happy in all my life. You and Dick and Alfred--you're the best thing that's ever happened to me!" Releasing

him suddenly, she hurried towards the side entrance to the Manor. He was about to follow, when she waved him to stop.

"No, Bruce. Please, no goodbyes and no visits. Remember, I'm only a phone call away. And in just a few days, I'll be yours forever." With that she disappeared into the house. A few minutes later, Bruce heard the sounds of the Bentley's engines starting and within moments, he saw the headlights disappearing down the long winding drive.

As he listened to the faint sounds of the car slowly fade away, Bruce was suddenly struck with an unexpected chill in his soul. He had the oddest sensation that Selina was driving out of his life forever...

She'd waited until well after midnight, long past when the lights inside had gone out. The sharp snap of her whip was carried away by the soft summer breeze. She swung over to the targeted balcony and landed on silent cat feet. She looked down at her carryall and smiled ruefully.

"I can't believe that I'm actually going to do this."

She slinked to the door and tried it. Locked. Of course, she thought wryly. What was that saying about the barn door being locked *after* the horse had escaped?

The occupants had started thinking home security only *after* they no longer had any valuables worth taking. That is, until tonight. Because tonight, the Catwoman was committing a reverse burglary. Tonight, the Catwoman was starting a new job, that of returning the valuables that she'd stolen in the previous weeks.

Disengaging the silent alarm was ridiculously easy. "Honestly!" she muttered under her breath. "I should think about a new career as a security consultant." Stopping at the door, the experienced thief sprayed a powdery aerosol into the immediate entrance way.

Instantly, several lines of criss-crossing light beams appeared in front of her. She sighed. How cliché. Her quick eyes measured the distance between the light beams. No sweat.

The Catwoman simply leaped gracefully between, above, and below the beams. Within seconds she was safely on the other side. Taking out a handheld digital scanner, she checked for any more electronic tripwires. The rest of the place was clean.

Moving quickly through the shadows, the Catwoman found the safe, exactly where she'd left it. Checking it for booby-traps, she found none. Placing a magnetic keypad on the safe's door, she punched a series of numbers. It instantly scanned through multiple combinations and permutations until the safe cracked open.

"Meow," she purred. "Okay, my lovelies, in you go. All safe and sound," she whispered as she returned the jewelry back to its home. About to close the safe, she stopped. "No, let them find this first thing in the morning. Let the world know that the Catwoman has turned a new leaf."

Hesitating momentarily, the Catwoman smiled her Cheshire cat smile and placed her calling card--that of a purple cat's paw--in the safe along with the valuables.

Once outside, the Catwoman again cracked her whip and leaped between buildings. It was already after 2:00 a.m. and she had many more stops to make...

Chapter Eighteen

He caught sight of her lithe figure by the weak light of the quickly setting moon. Grinning ferally, Batman took off after her...

He'd gone out that night to think. Nothing cleared a dedicated crimefighter's mind like a good old-fashioned knockdown, drag-out with the underworld's lowly scum.

Still, even as the Dark Knight had stopped a bank robbery in progress, a couple of muggings, and an attempted home invasion, his mind was barely on what he was doing. At last, Batman climbed to the top of Gotham Cathedral.

"To regroup," he told himself.

Actually, he wanted to think. As he crouched on one of the myriad gargoyles that gave the massive gothic structure its unique look, Gordon's words came back to him. They'd stung deeply, and Bruce finally admitted that it was because his friend had spoken truthfully.

"I *don't* know anything about her," he said.

~Except the most important thing!~ a sharp voice retorted.

"I don't know who she is or where she comes from," Batman argued.

~You know you love her and that *Dick* loves her.~

"What has she told me about herself?" Batman asked. "That her mother died when she was five and that she was raised by her father?"

~So what's your point, World's Greatest Detective?~

"What if she's just like the others? What if all she's *really* after is the Wayne fortune? What would it do to Dick?"

~Is it really *Dick* you're worried about? Or is it your pride? Are you so afraid to love unconditionally that you're ready to start looking for skeletons where there are none?~

"No! That's not it at all. I *love* her!" Batman shouted, raising his clenched fist in sudden anger. Staring at his hand, he slowly opened it, releasing the rage that had taken hold momentarily. He gazed out upon his beloved city's skyline and added in a whisper, "I *do* love her. Almost to the point of desperation." He stood.

"But what if I'm letting my feelings blind me to reality? The first thing I learned when I put on this cowl is that I couldn't let myself become personally involved in my cases. If I don't maintain my professional detachment, I risk becoming--"

~Human?~ the voice sneered.

Batman waved his gauntleted hand as if swatting at a gnat.

"I risk becoming ineffective. And possibly dangerous."

~Oh, excuse me. I didn't know we were talking about one of your cases. I *thought* we were discussing Selina. I *thought* we were discussing your feelings.~

"So what's *your* point?" It was Batman's turn to sneer.

~Sometimes when we don't have all the facts, when we don't know all the answers, then all we have to rely on is faith--in ourselves and in each other. Trust your feelings, Bruce. Trust *her*.*~

Batman stood on top of the Cathedral for a moment longer. After awhile, his grim features were softened by a slight half-smile. He looked around at the monstrous gargoyles, the twin gothic spires, and the exquisite rose window.

Looking up to the top of the twin, gothic spires, his eyes finally settled on the elaborately carved stone crucifix.

"Thank you," he whispered. Shooting out a jump-line, he flew into the night...

A half-hour later he saw her, swooping gracefully between the exclusive skyscraper condominiums.

"Gotcha," he murmured, with a grim satisfied half-smile. He'd been on the trail of the elusive 'Catwoman,' as she was being called now, for over two weeks. In the short time she'd been burglarizing the homes of Gotham's wealthiest citizens, she'd stolen jewelry and cash worth upwards in the high millions.

She'd even taken the time to feed the family cats a few times. In one case, she'd considerably left a recommended diet for a house cat. Its owner later admitted that the beloved pet was obese.

Batman shook his head. "Why does Gotham always get the nuts?"

Within minutes he was on her trail, following at a safe distance while keeping to the shadows. He watched her with grudging admiration. She was good. *Very* good.

At last, she came to a building without balconies. He moved in closer and watched with interest to see how she'd handle it. She landed easily on a narrow ledge, stowed her whip--a cat o' nine tails, Batman noted--in her left, thigh-high boot, and simply *walked* up to her targeted window, as if she were taking a stroll through the park.

Arriving at the window she wanted, she crouched momentarily, reached into a bag that she carried slung across her shoulders, took out an instrument and set to work.

Batman knew that the occupants of this particular apartment, which she'd hit only last week, had installed a new and complicated security system. He wondered if the Catwoman would manage to beat it.

In less than a minute, he had his answer. The Catwoman held her hand up and, instantly, a set of sharp claws flashed in the moonlight. Without preamble, she easily cut through the glass, reached inside with a set of wire cutters, and clipped the wires to the primary alarm system.

Unlocking the window, she opened it and climbed in. Batman swooped down to the open window. Donning his night vision goggles, he searched the interior for any signs of the burglar. He knew that there was a secondary system further inside the condominium and waited to see if she'd set it off.

After a few minutes, he took out his handheld scanner and quietly activated it. Holding it out, Batman turned it left then right, trying to pick up any readings from the system's unique signature.

Nothing.

The Catwoman had successfully disabled the secondary alarm. Batman shook his head in grim admiration. She was a thorough professional.

Bruce Wayne knew the occupants of this specific apartment, Lucius and Mattie Fox. Bruce had personally recommended the security company that set up the new system. The company was actually a subsidiary of WayneTech and had installed the vast security network in the Wayne Enterprises' tower.

Apparently, even the newer, high-tech, high-speed, electronic measures that WayneTech Security had installed were no match for this experienced thief.

"I oughtta hire her as a security consultant," Batman muttered ruefully.

As he moved silently through the well-known living area, Batman wondered why she would hit this place a second time? She must know that she'd already taken anything of real value that Lucius and Mattie might keep here. In fact, because of Bruce's urging, they'd rented a safety deposit box to store whatever valuables they had left until the Catwoman was finally caught.

Her actions tonight didn't make sense. In fact, she wasn't following her usual M.O. Curious, Batman finally found her. She had the Foxes' safe opened and she was removing whatever was left in it.

Batman blinked.

No! he corrected, stunned. She was *returning* what she'd previously

taken. He watched in growing disbelief as the Catwoman steadily, if somewhat reluctantly, replaced each item in the safe. As a final measure, she placed a card inside, along with the valuables.

Kneeling back, she sighed quietly, and then in a single, smooth motion rose to her feet. Batman stood back, remaining hidden in the dark gloom. Unaware that she was being watched, the Catwoman slipped out the way she'd come in.

As soon as she was gone, Batman walked over to the open safe. Taking a quick inventory of the items, he saw that everything Lucius reported missing had been returned. Noticing the small card she'd left behind, Batman picked it up. A purple cat's paw was centered on it. About to return it, Batman saw writing in a flowing, feminine hand on the back.

//Forgive me. I hope my actions didn't cause you undue pain.//

Raising a single eyebrow, Batman placed the card in a hidden compartment within his utility belt and hurried out after the thief. He shot out a grappling line to the roof across the street. Landing in a crouch, he made his way quickly to the side.

He searched in a 360-degree radius. She was gone. Grimacing, Batman opened a hidden patch on his gauntlet and checked his chronometer. It was after 5:00 a.m. Dawn was less than an hour away. Time to return home.

He thought about the Catwoman's calling card.

"I've got you now, lady..."

The next morning, Dick literally flew into the Batcave. Bruce hadn't been at breakfast and he hadn't been to bed all night. Unable to eat, Dick left the table without waiting to be excused and hurried to the secret entrance.

He found his dad hunched over the lab table working diligently on a piece of evidence. He was still in his Batman costume, but the cowl was pulled back.

"Bruce?" Dick called. As long as Batman didn't have his mask on, it was all right to call him Bruce. Otherwise, Dick was *supposed* to address him *only* as Batman. So many rules to remember, Dick sighed.

He landed softly next to where Bruce was working.

"Bruce?" he repeated quietly. He wasn't allowed to interrupt *Batman* while he was working, but since he *did* have his cowl pulled back, it was really *Bruce*, Dick thought.

Bruce looked up. Seeing his boy's worried face, he reached over and gently caressed Dick's cheek.

"Why the scowl?" he asked affectionately.

Dick's face was immediately transformed into a bright smile. He shrugged. "You weren't at breakfast and you weren't in your room. I got worried. What are you working on?"

Bruce smiled at Dick's ability to go from one thought to another at lightning speed.

"I'm fine as you can see, and I'm checking on a small bit of evidence left behind by a certain lady tiger."

"The Catwoman?" Dick breathed excitedly.

"Um-hum," Bruce muttered distractedly, again looking through his spectroscope.

"What are you lookin' at?" Dick asked curiously.

Bruce sighed at the interruption. Gazing up at his son's eager blue eyes, he relented immediately.

"C'mere," Bruce said, picking Dick up and placing him on his lap. "Oof. You're getting big," he said. Dick giggled.

"Here," Bruce said, pointing at the screen. "Look at this." Taking a pen, Bruce indicated the several points of interest that he'd been exploring in the writing.

//Forgive me. I hope my actions didn't cause you undue pain.//

"Look at how she dots her *i's*," Bruce said. "Here and here and here." Bruce pointed at the words, 'Forgive,' 'didn't,' and 'pain.'

Dick looked up at him, confused. He shrugged. "I don't see nothing," he said.

Bruce grinned slightly at the boy's use of the double negative. It was a habit that was slowly driving Alfred crazy.

"That's all right. Now look at how she dot's *this* one." He pointed at the word, 'actions.' Dick studied the word carefully. "Do you see anything different?"

Dick nodded uncertainly. "It looks like she pressed down hard right over the letter, then she kinda moved the pen over to the left."

Bruce smiled at the boy's observation. "Excellent, Dick! Now, my dear Detective Grayson, what kind of conclusion would *you* draw from that tiny bit of evidence?"

Dick concentrated on what he'd just seen. Obviously it meant something to Bruce. Something important. But what? A light suddenly shone in his eyes.

"I know!" he cried. "The writer's left-handed. She started to dot the *i*, but her hand slipped, and because she's left-handed, the pen slid to the left. If she'd been right-handed, then it would've

slipped to the right!"

"Go to the head of Handwriting Analysis 101!" Bruce said proudly. Dick turned thoughtful eyes to Bruce.

"But how come the *other* *i's* aren't dotted the same way?"

"That's a good question, son. Remember, that a person's handwriting is something personal. Within a single sentence--sometimes within a single word--the writer may actually write a letter differently. Sometimes even mix cursive and printed letters. However, it's not just the consistencies in the person's handwriting that give us a clue as to who the writer is, but the *in*consistencies." Dick nodded at this information.

"The writer was very careful to dot her *i's* in a regular manner, possibly because she has a very neat hand. But *here* at the word 'actions' her hand slipped, and she left us an important clue."

"Bruce?" Dick began. "What if she's not really left-handed? I mean, what if she *let* her hand slip on *purpose* so that we'd only *think* that she was left-handed."

Bruce looked at his son and student with open admiration. "Dick, that question shows the mark of a good investigator--someone who doesn't come to a conclusion until he has all the facts available."

Dick fairly glowed under his dad's praise. Growing serious he asked, "So, what *is* the truth, Bruce? *Is* she or *isn't* left-handed."

Bruce looked at his son with solemn eyes and held him close for a minute.

"The truth, Dick? The truth is that we have a very clever thief running loose in Gotham City. At this moment she *seems* to be left-handed. She *seems* to be returning the items that she stole. And--"

--And she *seems* to be sorry for what she did," Dick concluded.

Bruce nodded. "Why don't you go on up to breakfast, son? I'll join you shortly..."

"What do you have?" Gordon asked.

"You won't believe *this*, Commish," Bullock said. He tossed a handful of black and white 8x10 glossies on Gordon's desk. "The doll on the left is the target, your boy billionaire's current chippy, Selina Kyle--or whatever she calls herself. We still haven't got a make on her prints."

As Gordon studied the shots, Bullock added casually, "The guy in the glasses is dead by the way."

"What?" Gordon looked up, startled. "When did it happen? Why wasn't I told?"

"According to the feds, the guy died twelve years ago," Bullock said ironically. "In a fire."

"Oh?" Gordon said, catching on. "Tell me more."

"Jake 'the Fake' McCabe," Bullock said succinctly. "The guy changes personalities like Wayne changes dames. He was wanted on weapons charges, drug- smuggling, extortion, murder--the usual gamut of boyish over-exuberance. The feds thought they had 'im a coupla times, but he always managed to make good his escape. Then twelve years ago, the DEA and the US Marshals cornered him in a secluded cabin up in the Ozarks. One thing led to another and--"

--Don't tell me," Gordon said tiredly. He'd heard it all before about federal agents and their excessive use of force. "They brought in everything except an aircraft carrier--"

"Oh, they tried. But they couldn't get it to navigate up the Missouri River," Bullock quipped.

--and razed the place to the ground," Gordon finished.

"That's about the size of it," Bullock said. "The feds found a body amidst all the rubble, which a dental ID'd as that of McCabe."

Gordon looked up at the detective, his eyes narrowed. "They were able to identify the remains through dental records?" Gordon asked. "Then how is it possible that McCabe's still alive?"

A look of cold rage flitted across Bullock's usually taciturn face. "Plastic surgery *and* oral surgery. Whoever the poor bum was, Commish, his mouth and jaw were *altered* to exactly match the perp's. Near's I can figure, sir, we're dealing with some *real* monsters here. And this Kyle dame, she's right in their pocket."

Bullock gave Gordon a hard glare.

"Whatever her game is, Commish, I wouldn't give two plugged nickels for Wayne's preppy hide. Your rich friend's life is in real danger, sir. Somebody oughtta warn 'im..."

Later, alone in his office, Gordon stared at the photos on his desk. Bullock's words rang clearly in his head.

"Somebody oughtta warn 'im..."

Gordon picked up the photos one by one, carefully studying each. A glossy he hadn't noticed before slipped out of the pile. It was a telephoto shot of the woman who called herself Selina Kyle bending down and hugging a happily smiling Dick Grayson.

Bringing a magnifying glass to the photo, Gordon closely studied the faces. Selina had removed the dark glasses she'd been wearing earlier. The boy's blissful smile sent a pang of regret through Gordon. Bruce *said* the boy loved her.

Moving the glass over to Selina's face, Gordon thought he saw something that he hadn't expected. Bending closer over the photo, he saw it.

There, he thought! The telephoto lens had caught it perfectly.

A single tear tracked down Selina's cheek as she hugged the boy closely to her. A cold feeling grew inside Gordon. Bullock was wrong. It wasn't Bruce's life that was in danger.

It was Dick's...!

Chapter Nineteen

She knew she wasn't alone.

Stirring softly, as if changing positions in bed, Selina reached surreptitiously underneath her pillow. Easing her fingers around the leather grip, she waited.

Eyes closed she listened with all of her senses, trying to place each intruder in her mind. There were three.

On three, Selina, she purred to herself. One...two...*three*!

Instantly, Selina leaped out of bed, slashing the intruder immediately on her left with the cat-o'-nine-tails. She snarled in satisfaction as he screamed in pain. Pulling with surprising strength, she threw her arm around his neck and held him in front of her as shield.

His companions held their fire giving her the split second she needed. Selina applied pressure to a point underneath his chin. At this, her hapless 'shield' lost consciousness and collapsed in a heap. As he went down, Selina vaulted over the bed and launched herself at another intruder.

The bedside alarm went off suddenly. She'd set it for 6:30 p.m. Selina realized that she'd slept the day through.

Kicking with the heel of her bare foot, Selina connected with the would-be killer's temple. As he stumbled forward, she followed through with a one-two kempo punch to the solar plexus. Seeing that he was struggling not to go down, Selina leaped, spun in mid-air, and kicking out, connected with her opponent's jaw.

He went down finally. Selina didn't take a break, however. As soon as she delivered the final kick, she executed three backsprings, recovered with a gymnast's grace and turned to face the last man. Cracking her deadly whip, she advanced on her opponent.

"Listen...please! Look, we were only followin' orders--" Selina lashed the whip around his neck and pulled the slack in less than an eyeblink. Within seconds, he was on his knees, gagging for air, his hands clawing at the leather snake.

"Please..." he gasped. He looked at her with bulging, pleading eyes. His face was turning a purplish shade of blue.

Abruptly, Selina loosened some of the slack. He immediately gulped in a lungful of air with deep heartfelt gasps. He huddled on the floor, gasping and wheezing.

Selina slinked in feline grace to where he lay, cowering in abject terror. She slowly lowered herself next to him, inch by sultry inch, her flimsy nightgown revealing more than it hid.

Toying with him, Selina brought her hand up to his hair and playfully walked her fingers from his ear up to the crown of his head.

She smiled, a feral feline smile that sent her prisoner's heart hammering in fear.

His hair was matted with perspiration. His forehead glistened from drops of sweat that slowly trickled down either temple. He held his breath in frozen terror and waited.

Leaning in close, almost cheek-to-cheek, she whispered in his ear. Her hot breath sent a shiver down his leg, perversely arousing him to her sensual presence.

"You have less than ten seconds before I kill you. If you want to live past that, you'd better start talking." She brought her hand up to his cheek and softly caressed it. Smiling gently, she added, "And, darling, you'd better sound convincing."

She left her unwelcome guests bound and gagged, hanging from the GNN television station transmission tower.

"Don't worry, boys. I'm sure a certain masked avenger will be by later and 'rescue' you," the Catwoman purred. "Ta!"

Her mocking smirk disappeared as soon as she turned her back to them. She had to move and move fast. Dick was in danger and it was her fault.

Leaping into the night, the Catwoman cracked her whip, sending it out towards a nearby flagpole. As soon as the whip was wound snugly round the protruding pole, the Catwoman swung out and up into the growing gloom.

"Bruce, why can't I go with you?" Dick asked. "How can I be Batman's partner if I have a little kid's bedtime?"

"You know the rules, Dick," Bruce said curtly. He was walking towards the uniform vault. "You have a *little kid's* bedtime--as you call it--because you're only ten. You need your sleep--just like all regular kids your age."

"But I don't *need* as much sleep," Dick protested. "I can stay up way past nine! I mean, when Alfred says lights out, I have a really

hard time going to sleep!"

Bruce smiled to himself while he changed. He didn't mention the many times either he or Alfred had carried Dick, who'd nodded off, to bed. He grinned at the memory of Robin falling asleep in the Batmobile after a long night's patrol.

Ready to go, Batman put on his sternest demeanor and then stepped out to face his rebellious junior partner.

"Who's the boss?" he asked, without preamble.

Dick looked ready to protest, but then dropped his eyes and muttered, "You are."

"Who makes the rules?"

"You do."

"What are the nights set aside for Robin's patrol?"

Dick sighed. "Robin only comes out on weekends."

"And the reason is--?"

"Because I'm still in training and you don't have the time to always be watching out for me."

"When will Robin be considered as fully qualified to accompany me *every* night?"

Dick sighed again and looked up at Batman through lowered eyelashes. Exuding attitude, he crossed his arms and said darkly, "When *Batman* says I'm ready."

Batman looked down at the fuming boy, a smile struggling to break through his stern exterior.

"Very well," Batman said. About to whirl around and stride to the Batmobile, Batman hesitated. Unable to help himself, he softly caressed his son's cheek. To his surprise, Dick threw his arms around him and began to sob brokenheartedly.

Stunned Batman pulled back his cowl and knelt down, holding Dick close to him. There was more going on here than just Dick being disappointed that he couldn't accompany him.

"Dick, what is it, son? Talk to me," Bruce said. Dick had his face buried in the Bat-cowl. Sobbing for a few more moments, he finally gained some control.

"I don't want you to die," he whispered. Bruce felt a cold fist grab his insides.

"Dick, what brought *this* on? Of course, I'm not going to die," Bruce reassured him. Dick hugged his neck harder as if he didn't believe him. Bruce held his breath at the sudden pain. An emotionally upset super-strong kid could be a physical challenge to a non-super Dad.

"Every time you go out by yourself, I get scared," Dick said in a small voice. "I start thinking, what if this is the last time I'll see you? And I dream about Mom and Dad falling. And sometimes I dream about earthquakes and explosions and giant glaciers falling on top of me. I get so confused, Bruce. And scared. I think about the Joker and Zucco and the other bad men you fight. And I wonder if one day maybe--?" Dick paused and took a deep breath that was more of a sob.

"A-And I wake up all sweaty and scared." He wiped his eyes and nose on his sleeve and blinked at Bruce through tearful eyes.

"How can I just stand by and watch you go out at night and face all those monsters by yourself? When I have all these powers? If something happened to you, and I wasn't there to help--" Dick threw himself at Bruce once more and continued his heartfelt confession of deep-seated guilt.

"Bruce, I couldn't save Mom and Dad 'cause I didn't know how. I could never forgive myself if--if--if I wasn't there to *save* you."

Bruce clutched Dick to him. He felt a stinging in the back of his own eyes. How long had Dick been feeling this way? Had he been carrying this burden of guilt over his parents' deaths without Bruce even being aware of it? And what of the possible future guilt Dick might suffer should something ever happen to him?

"I'm sorry, son. So sorry that you've been hurting inside like this and I didn't know it. That I didn't do anything to make you feel better."

"It's not your fault, Bruce," Dick sniffed. "*I'm* the one--"

"*No*!" Bruce interrupted. He gripped Dick by the arms, and held him out, forcing the boy to look at him. "*No*! It's *not* your fault! *Zucco* killed your parents! He--and *only* he--is responsible for their deaths. You're just a little boy. These *powers* of yours do *not* make you responsible for the actions of others. Nor the consequences of what others do."

"But, I should've *done* something!" Dick protested.

"What? What could you have done?" Bruce asked. "You didn't know how to use any of your powers. You're still learning how to control them right now. You didn't even *know* what most of your powers *were*!"

Bruce shook his head and stood to his full height. He turned his back on Dick for a few moments, struggling for the words that he needed to say. Taking a deep breath, he finally turned around and faced the stricken boy.

"Dick, why do you think I don't let you come with me *every* night?"

"'Cause I'm not trained yet," Dick said.

"Yes, but that's just part of the reason. Dick, it wasn't your job to

protect your parents. It was *their* job to protect *you*--"

"But--!"

"No, let me finish," Bruce said. "It was your parents' job to protect you, and now it's *my* job. Not vice versa. *You're* the child. You're not the grownup. And powers or no powers, you are *not* responsible for my safety. But *I* am responsible for yours. So is Alfred. And Selina. By agreeing to marry me--" He paused, his eyes softening with affection. "I mean, marry *us*--she's saying that *she* wants to take responsibility for you, too."

Bruce walked up to Dick and gently raised his chin. He felt his heart ache at the hurt he saw in his son's eyes.

"Dick, there are a lot of people who love you and want to protect you. And that's how it *should* be. Ten year olds, no matter who they are, need to be loved and protected. *You* need to be loved and protected." Bruce gazed long and steadily at Dick.

"And I don't care if you're the most powerful kid in the whole universe. I am *not* going to let you take on that kind of responsibility on your shoulders. You're not ready. Not yet. Do you understand, son?"

Dick nodded uncertainly. "I think so."

Bruce gave him a half-smile.

"Good, 'cause I'm not sure I could ever explain it again."

Dick's solemn expression slowly relaxed and was replaced with a weak smile. Becoming serious again, he asked beseechingly, "Will you be careful?"

"Of course."

"You promise?"

"I promise." Bruce placed his hand warmly on Dick's shoulder. "Don't forget to brush your teeth before you go to bed tonight."

"Uh-huh," Dick said.

Bruce replaced the Bat-cowl and started heading towards the Batmobile. "And don't forget your prayers!"

"I know."

"Don't forget bedtime is nine o'clock sharp!" Batman said without looking back.

"Yes, sir," Dick said disappointedly.

Bruce paused at the driver's side of the Batmobile. "And Dick?" Dick looked up questioningly. "Don't forget--" He held out his hand in the 'L' sign.

Dick beamed, holding out his own hand. "I won't," he said. As the

Batmobile roared out of the cave, he whispered, "I love you, too."

The sharp pressure on his throat woke him. A bewhiskered feline grin was less than an inch from his face. She was so close that her whiskers tickled his nose. Her Cheshire grin was completely devoid of humor, however. It was a cold grin. A dangerous grin.

"Wha-What's the meaning of this?" he croaked. Even this small bit of movement caused the sharp point to prick through the skin near his Adam's Apple. He gasped suddenly, the whites of his eyes bulging in fear.

The Catwoman's green eyes lit in amusement at his discomfiture.

"I'm here to warn you, Falcone. The boy's under **my** protection now. Any harm comes to him, and I'll skin you alive."

To prove her point, she carefully removed her sharp claw from where it'd embedded in his throat and brought her hand up to his face. She very gently, almost lovingly, ran her razor-sharp claws down the length of his cheek.

He lay completely still, not daring to breathe. The gleaming claws barely touched his cheek, but they sent a cold shiver down the length of his body.

"Do you get the **point**?" she purred.

Swallowing, he dared to speak.

"W-We had a deal. You took a contract!"

"I got a better deal," she purred almost pityingly. "Contract's been cancelled."

"B-But you've already been paid a third of the money. Over a million dollars!"

"Yes I have, haven't I?" she mocked. "So sorry, darling. I guess you lose."

"You'll never get away with this!" he growled, his eyes flashing. For a moment it seemed as if he was going to try something. The Catwoman none-too-gently dug her claws into his cheek.

"But, darling, I already have!" Mocking smile firmly in place, she rose, her dark silhouette outlining her perfect form. Without turning her back to him, she began a graceful retreat towards the open balcony doors.

"Call off your goons, Falcone!" the Catwoman hissed in warning. "If **any** harm comes to the boy, you'll pay--dearly."

"You haven't heard the last of this!" Falcone yelled. "You don't know who you're messing with!"

"On the contrary, Falcone, it's you who doesn't have a clue." Pausing at the French doors, she added, "You're playing my game now. And I make rules." With that she whirled and leaped over the balcony railing.

As soon as she left, Falcone jumped out of bed and ran out into the balcony. He caught sight of her lithe shadow disappearing into the wood line.

"That's what *you* think, Cat-lady," he muttered. "Before this night is over, my boys will have the Grayson brat on ice."

"The woman's a liability," a quiet voice said from behind him.

Falcone whirled around in shock. His visitor stood in the darker gloom just inside the French doors. The shadows hid her exotic beauty and amethyst eyes. Yet, not even the darkness could quite disguise the underlying menace she radiated.

He felt a sudden shiver. It seemed that tonight just happened to be his night to be humiliated by women, he thought sullenly.

In an attempt to recover, he tried to dismiss the woman's fears. "The Catwoman's no problem. My boys'll take care of her--"

"Kill her," the woman said, abruptly turning to leave. "My father will not tolerate any interference with this mission. He wants the boy. And what my father wants, he gets."

The door slammed behind her. Falcone stood in the middle of his bedroom, staring at the closed door.

"What the hell have I gotten myself into?" he wondered. "Who *is* this 'Talía' woman? More importantly, *who* is her father?"

Dick sat cross-legged at the Batcomputer. He was running one of Batman's training exercises. Dick's proficiency with the computer had impressed Batman that time he'd found Zucco by breaking all of the security codes. Of course, since then, Batman had devised several much more advanced traps to challenge the boy.

Running his fingers through the keyboard at lightning speed, Dick was disappointed to hear an electronic voice say, "~Gotcha~!" He slapped his forehead.

"Not again!" That was the third time the computer had won. He looked at the clock. 8:45. It was almost bedtime. Dick sighed. It was time to shut down.

"~Good night, Dick~!" the computer intoned electronically.

Dick grimaced. "Good night," he muttered. Once the test program was offline, Dick stood and stretched, yawning. "I'm not tired," he denied. "And I'm not a little kid, neither."

Jamming his hands in his pockets, he started walking across the elevated metal grillwork that supported the computer station. As he

hopped lightly down the steps, his eyes caught the gleaming brightness of the small spacecraft standing alongside other trophies from Batman's career. The craft was still sitting on its pedestal, enclosed in the transparent titanium/steel reinforced case.

Dick was struck by a sudden yearning to touch the spacecraft's outer skin. He couldn't remember ever touching it. He had vague memories of the night over a year ago when he'd sleepwalked through the Batcave.

Even now, his dreams were being haunted by images of a frozen world torn apart by fiery earthquakes.

Pressing the hidden control button on the side of the glass case, Dick stood still for a few minutes, mesmerized by the ethereal beauty of the alien craft. Slowly, he brought his hand up to it until his fingertips were touching it.

He ran his hand along its cool, even surface, marveling at its splendor. At last, his fingers lightly touched a bump on its otherwise smooth skin. Curious, he applied a light pressure to it. His small mouth formed a surprised 'O' as a hatch suddenly opened.

Dick stood, eyes wide as he looked with wonderment at the tiny incubator that protected him on the long journey from--what was the name of the planet again? Krypton?

"Krypton...!" he whispered. "And this is how I came. When I was just a baby. Mom and Dad found me. They didn't care about me being a--" He stopped. "--an alien. Mom and Dad never cared. They loved me. Just like Bruce does."

A warm wave of emotion swept through him. Smiling, he was about close the hatch again, when he noticed a metal box jammed to the side. Narrowing his eyes, Dick reached for it. It was just an ordinary metal box. Concentrating for moment, he tried to inspect its contents with his X-ray vision.

He was blocked.

"Lead? That's funny." Curiously, he turned the box over in his hands. "It's just a metal box. Like one of Bruce's specimen cases. What's it doing in here?" Shrugging, he opened it...

"Master Dick!" Alfred called. "Time for bed, young man."

He halted at the foot of the stairs.

"*Master Dick*!" Alfred ran towards where Dick lay, next to the open display case, unconscious. He felt for a pulse. Weak. His skin was clammy and deathly pale.

"*Master Dick*!" Alfred shouted, more frightened than he'd ever been in his life. Lifting the boy in his arms, Alfred carried him to the Batcave's infirmary. Quickly hooking him up to the life monitoring equipment, Alfred made him as comfortable as possible. Placing his hand gently on Dick's forehead, Alfred felt his throat catch.

Blinking rapidly, he made his way to the communications console and placed the call he most dreaded.

"Sir, this is Alfred. Come in please..."

Batman had tracked them for the better part of the night. A regular terrible trio. Larry, Moe, and Curley. They'd been firebombing empty storefronts all week long. Tonight, they'd torched two abandoned warehouses, and one condemned apartment building.

Unfortunately, one of the 'abandoned' warehouses had been a flophouse for a group of homeless kids. Five of the kids were at Gotham General in critical condition, two hadn't made it. One of the victims was only ten.

That made it personal.

"Gentlemen, why don't we say you call it a night?" he said from the shadows.

"It's the Bat!" 'Larry' yelled.

"All right," 'Moe' laughed. "I've always wanted to try fried Bat!"

"Yeah, man," 'Curley' guffawed. "With catsup and fries on the side!"

"Swell," Batman muttered. "Okay, boys, it's getting late. Let's get this over with."

The three goons whipped their flamethrowers around.

"Ready--!" 'Larry' commanded. They each brought their flamethrower's metal hose to port arms.

"Power on--!" 'Moe' said. As one, they flipped the power button to 'green.'

"Let's rock and ro--!" Before Curley could finish, he was knocked unconscious by a Batarang.

"I'm more into the classics myself," Batman quipped, diving for cover behind a row of dumpsters. He was just in time. The two remaining fireflies both whipped their deadly infernos at him.

At this moment, his communicator beeped. Batman could feel the canisters heating up to white hot. Soon, they'd start melting around him.

"Sir, this is Alfred. Come in, please..."

Batman looked up. The fire escape. No time to climb. He fired off a jump line straight up to the roof. As he cleared the line of dumpsters, the weakened metal canisters slowly collapsed in on themselves. The heat being emitted from them was almost unbearable.

"Sir--! Come *in*, please!"

"Hold on a sec," Batman muttered. "I'm a little busy just now."

"Sir, it's Master Dick. I've already called Doctor Leslie."

As he rose, Batman spotted a water tower on the rooftop of the next building. Just what he needed. Looking down at the two fire starters, Batman swung over to the adjoining building.

"What is it?" he asked Alfred as he ran across the rooftop. "What's happened?"

Taking out a second grappling gun, he aimed at a weak point on the water tower's supporting structure.

"Alfred--!" he called. "What's happened to Dick?"

"Sir, I don't know. I found him unconscious in the Batcave."

Once the grappler wrapped itself around one of the water tower's legs, Batman pulled.

"Unconscious--?"

The leg began to give way.

"Yes, sir. He'd opened the spacecraft and must have been looking at it--"

The tower began to slowly topple over the side of the roof. Batman took out a thumb-sized cylinder from his utility belt...

"Has he said anything--?" he asked as he took out a six-inch long tube and quickly screwed it onto the other piece in his hand.

"No, sir. He hasn't regained consciousness since I found him. Master Bruce..." Alfred's voice became deathly calm. "Master Bruce, our boy's dying, sir. Please hurry." The transmission ended.

"Alfred? Alfred!?" A murderous rage overwhelming him, Batman popped a dime-sized pellet into the tube cylinder, held his arm straight out, took aim, and fired. The mini rocket launcher immediately sent a high-powered explosive towards the water tower.

It blew on impact, sending a ton of water cascading down on the arsonists below, dousing them and their flame-throwers.

Swooping down without benefit of safety line, Batman landed on the fire starters and dispatched them in less than a minute. Cuffing all three, he called in their location to the GCPD even as he roared home.

"What do you have, Charlie?"

"Looks like a car pulling in, Nick," Charlie reported. "Some dame's getting out." Nick looked up to where his partner was situated for

lookout duty. Charlie was positioned on the higher branches of a tall oak tree, while Nick was lying prone on the ground among some tall hedges.

"Is it the Kyle woman?" Nick asked. His night vision zoom lenses were on the fritz.

"Nah. It's some old lady."

"Yeah?" Nick asked distractedly. He was trying to take the goggles apart to check the internal mechanisms.

"Yeah."

Silence. That wasn't Charlie--?

"Nick, who was that--?" The sharp crack of a whip shattered the stillness of the night. Charlie suddenly came tumbling out of his perch in the tree. He landed hard, striking his head on an exposed root. He lay still.

"Charlie!" Nick yelled, making a move to go to his partner. The last thing he saw was the heel of a boot a split second before it connected with his chin.

"Sorry, boys. Lights out!" the Catwoman's amused voice purred softly. Securing their wrists and ankles, she straightened and disappeared back into the vast wood line that bounded Wayne Manor. Two down, an unknown number to go...

Chapter Twenty

Batman drove like a maniac. As soon as he cleared the Gotham City limits he tried contacting the Manor.

"Come on...come on..." he muttered. "Pick up, Alfred..."

"Alfred here, sir," the quiet voice responded. Batman heard an underlying layer of anxiety.

"I'm almost home," Batman reported. "How is he?"

"Dr. Leslie is with him right now," Alfred said. "She believes Master Dick is suffering from some form of radiation poisoning. His invulnerability has left him; therefore, she's been able to take blood samples. She's currently running tests on the specimens she took."

"Give me some of the symptoms," Batman ordered. He wanted to get a feel for what could be wrong. He needed facts, something to base his assessment on. He needed information. He needed--

He needed something to sink his teeth into in order to stop feeling like his blood was freezing in his veins.

"His vitals are all weak, sir, and steadily growing weaker. Dr. Leslie has him on full respiration, she's--" the transmission stopped suddenly.

"Alfred! Alfred, come in!"

There was no response. An icy hand gripping his heart, Batman punched the Batmobile's thrusters to even higher rpm's.

Alfred stood back as Dr. Leslie Thompkins worked desperately over Dick. His heart had suddenly stopped. As soon as the heart monitor flatlined, Leslie raced to Dick's side and began CPR. Every few counts, she'd pause and quickly give mouth-to-mouth, check his pulse, then start again.

After a seeming eternity, the heart monitor began its familiar, steady rhythm. Alfred stood absolutely still, his eyes closed in relief.

The well-known roar of the Batmobile's engines were heard as it returned to its hangar. Within a few minutes, Batman was at his side. Alfred noted a raw welt from a possible burn on Batman's unprotected cheek, saw the oily remains of blackened smoke on his uniform. His cape was slightly singed.

Batman had eyes only for Dick. He stood over the boy, frozen in shock by Dick's deathly ill appearance. Batman slowly removed the cowl, transforming himself back into Bruce Wayne. He pinned Leslie with his burning scowl, his face dark with rage.

She ignored him and continued to work on Dick. She prepared a hypodermic and carefully injected the boy.

"How is he? What do you have?" Bruce demanded.

Leslie looked up, her eyes calm. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Bruce," she replied. "He's stable for now, but extremely weak. I'm not certain, but it looks like his immune system is shutting down. Something is attacking his bloodstream. It acts like radiation poisoning, but it isn't like any radiation poisoning I've ever seen before."

Then turning away, she returned to the lab and the electron microscope that she'd been checking before Dick had gone into cardiac arrest.

She sighed. "I just don't know what to do, Bruce," she admitted. "I've never seen anything like it before in my life. But then, I've never seen blood cells like these in my entire life, either." This last was muttered ironically.

"Let me," Bruce said curtly. Leslie stood to the side giving him room. Bruce adjusted the electron microscope. Finally, he saw what Leslie meant. What he assumed were Dick's equivalent of red blood cells had a strange, greenish tinge to them, while the white blood cells looked like they were being *eaten* or destroyed by whatever was attacking.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," he growled. "If we want to find the cure, we first need to find the poison." He turned to Alfred. "Where did you find him, Alfred?"

"There, by the open display case, Master Bruce," Alfred said, hurrying to where he'd discovered Dick, glad that he was doing something. "I found him here, unconscious," he said, pointing to the spot where Dick had been lying.

Bruce went down on his haunches, studying the area around the trophy cases carefully. Not seeing anything useful straight away, he stood and checked the interior of the spacecraft. He spotted one of his own metal specimen boxes inside. Eyes narrowed, he picked it up. It was open. He inspected its contents. Empty.

Standing still, Bruce thought back to the previous winter, to his trip to a certain farmer's field near Smallville, Kansas. A field where he'd found a strange green rock. A rock that his instruments could barely register. A rock that glowed with a mysterious, pulsing radiation.

Bruce took out his palm-sized scanner and again began to inspect the area. His training and self-discipline helped keep him calm and focused. While his scanner couldn't clearly record the makeup of the rock, it could nevertheless detect a trace. Outwardly patient, Bruce painstakingly scanned the area.

There! The scanner's LCD screen fluctuated minutely. He turned it back slightly. The screen fluctuated again. Bruce strode in the direction from where he believed the readings originated.

The dinosaur trophy stood tall and forbidding in the dark corner, a souvenir from one of Batman's earliest cases and a constant irritant for Alfred who dutifully dusted it on a weekly basis. Dick thought it was neat, but like all humans below a certain age, he was a junior expert in the field of paleontology and could rattle off just about every known species of prehistoric animal...

Dick claimed that Batman's trophy had never existed. "It's like Barney," he said dismissively. "Or, maybe more like Bugs Bunny. Why don't we get a *real* fossil instead?"

Alfred had rolled his eyes that at this suggestion. "My word," he'd muttered, shaking his head...

Bruce's mouth quirked at the memory. Recalling Dick's current state, the pleasant moment passed and was quickly replaced with his usual grim demeanor. Walking around and below the massive dinosaur's legs, Bruce inspected the immediate area around the trophy inch by careful inch.

At last, a dim, greenish glow radiating from underneath the dinosaur's curled tail revealed its location. Bruce bent down and picked up the peculiar rock. He once again ran his scanner over it, and again, the instrument barely 'pipped' to indicate that the rock even existed.

He held it up, his face bathed in its emerald luminescence. Alfred came and stood next to him, his eyes on the pulsing rock.

"What *is* it, Master Bruce?"

"I'm not sure, Alfred," Bruce admitted. "But I'm going to find

out..."

The Catwoman grinned her Cheshire grin.

"I'd call this a good night's work," she purred. She had all of the would-be kidnappers bundled up nicely, ready for transport. She'd tossed them unceremoniously into the back of the very van that they'd intended to use as the getaway vehicle.

She grinned at the irony.

"It's almost too bad I'm going to give up this life. Sometimes it can be so much fun."

Selina thought about a certain bright-eyed, dark-haired, flying boy whom she'd fallen in love with and her demeanor instantly softened. She thought of the boy's father and her heart filled with something else--a sense of renewed hope.

Hope for a life away from scum like these. Hope for a life where the only way she'd ever get her hands dirty again was by gardening.

Selina thought of Dick's secret. He had to be Robin, the Boy of Steel. After all, how many flying boys could there be in the world? Selina instinctively believed that made Bruce Wayne, Batman, but preferred not to think about it.

While Bruce was the kindest, sweetest man she'd ever known, Batman probably ate cats for lunch. Could it work between them? Would she be able to make it work? Could Bruce love a notorious jewel thief? Could *Batman*?

Selina felt a moment of doubt. Shaking her head she climbed into the van's cab and started the engine.

"It'll work," she said with determination as she pulled out to the main highway.

She'd *make* it work.

"She neutralized all of Falcone's men, mistress."

"Thank you, Ubu," Talia said, lowering her glasses. "I am quite aware of Falcone's failure and the Kyle woman's betrayal."

"Should I kill them for you, mistress?" Ubu asked.

"The woman, yes. Falcone, not yet. We may still have need of his contacts." Talia raised her glasses again. This time she zoomed in on the boy's bedroom window. There were no life readings in the room. In fact, there were no readings in the entire mansion.

"They must be down in the subterranean complex," she said. "The woman who came earlier was Dr. Leslie Thompkins. She is very close to the 'family.'" Talia lowered her glasses. "Someone's injured."

"Perhaps the detective?" Ubu offered.

"Perhaps," Talia murmured.

"Should I go in and find out for you, mistress?"

"No, Ubu. We'll wait. We have all the time in the world," she added under her breath. Was her beloved injured, she wondered?

Her beloved...

She'd never met Bruce Wayne, yet she loved him. Some might consider that as absurd, but she knew that they were fated to meet, fall in love, and have a child.

It was their destiny...

It was a few hours before dawn. Bruce had worked feverishly since his arrival running test after test on the green, glowing rock. He'd had to step into the lead-lined chamber to ensure that the radiation didn't reach Dick. That is, if it were indeed the radiation from the unusual rock that was poisoning Dick.

In less than five minutes, they knew that indeed it was. Bruce exposed some of the blood samples to the rock. When he checked the results, he felt his heart start racing with excitement.

"Leslie! I've got something. Look!" Bruce turned aside to allow her to view the test results.

Leslie gasped at what she saw. "Oh, my God..." she whispered. "Bruce, the red blood cells have turned completely green. The white blood cells are **also** beginning to turn color. They're being consumed almost entirely by the radiation poisoning! Bruce, I've never seen anything like it. What--what **is** this thing?"

"I found it last winter when I was investigating Dick's background. I put it in the specimen box with the intention of running tests on it, but when I found the spacecraft, I guess testing the rock became secondary. I put it inside the craft to retrieve later, but--" Bruce shrugged, hanging his head. "I didn't consider it an urgent matter."

Bruce closed his eyes and clasping his hands together, dropped his head on them. "God help me. I didn't consider it an urgent matter," he repeated in self-recrimination.

Bruce lifted his head and looked at Leslie with haunted eyes. Abruptly, he straightened his shoulders and deliberately hardened his features. His eyes burned with a violence that threatened to erupt at any given moment.

"We'll find the cure, Bruce," Leslie said with a confidence she didn't feel. Bruce didn't reply. He simply nodded.

"Let's get to work," he said...

While Bruce and Leslie worked fervently for the next few hours, Alfred stayed by Dick's bedside. He'd pulled a chair next to the medbed and sat down for a long vigil.

Dick seemed lost amidst the various tubes and machines that surrounded him. Alfred took Dick's small hand in his and held it tenderly. Without realizing that he was doing it, Alfred began to talk out loud.

"Master Dick, you can't leave us, young sir. Master Bruce and I do so need you. And you're to be Master Bruce and Miss Selina's ring bearer, remember? They'd both be heartbroken if you missed the wedding. You've become the most important part of our lives, Master Dick..."

Later, Alfred wouldn't be able to clearly recall what he talked about, he just remembered that there were many things he'd been meaning to say, and he found himself saying them. In the end, he spoke to Dick for what must have been hours...

Alfred woke up to Leslie disconnecting the life-support machines. Bruce stood hunched over the laboratory table, both hands on its gleaming surface. He looked broken.

"Wha--? What are you doing, Dr. Leslie? Master Bruce, what's going on here?"

Although Leslie worked wordlessly, the haunted look in her eyes told the story.

"Master Bruce?" Alfred stood respectfully to the side, not interfering with Leslie's solemn duty. Once she was finished, Bruce walked up to Dick and gently lifted him in his arms. Without a word, he carried him upstairs.

Stricken, Alfred stood in place. He turned to Leslie. She walked up to him, and he took her in his arms, giving as much of his strength as possible to ease her in their moment of sorrow. At last, she spoke, her voice tinged with grief.

"We can't find a cure, Alfred. Whatever this rock is, it's deadly to someone of Dick's physiology. His systems are shutting down one by one, and there's nothing we can do about it. He's dying, Alfred."

Alfred nodded, somehow finding reservoirs of inner strength to maintain his dignified bearing.

"All we can do is make his last few hours as comfortable as possible," Leslie added. She pulled away and gazed into his eyes.

"Bruce is taking him up to his room. Oh, Alfred, Dick's such a bright, shining presence among us, that he shouldn't--that is, his last few moments shouldn't be in a dark cave. He should be somewhere that the sun can reach."

Alfred nodded. "You are correct, of course. We should make Master Dick's last few moments as bright as he's made our lives." He took her arm and escorted her upstairs. "Come. It'll be daylight soon. We shouldn't leave Master Bruce alone at a time like this."

"It is the child," Talia said, gazing through her glasses. "He is the reason the doctor was called." It was serious. Her beloved was still wearing his dark costume, something she knew he **never** did when upstairs in the living area. He was sitting on the bed, cradling the child in his arms.

"Do not despair, beloved," Talia whispered. "I shall give you a child one day. A child of your own flesh. It is my destiny and my desire."

"Will the boy live?" Ubu asked.

"I cannot determine that from this distance," Talia replied. "Father will be most displeased."

"It shall be daylight soon, mistress. It is not prudent to remain and possibly risk being seen."

"You are correct, Ubu," Talia conceded. "Come, let us leave. We have much to do..."

The Catwoman watched the fun from an adjacent rooftop. Assault weapons drawn and wearing full riot gear, Gotham's Finest surrounded the abandoned van. She covered her mouth to keep from laughing out loud when the SWAT team opened the van doors.

The look of shock on their faces was priceless. "I would've **paid** money to see this," she said laughing softly.

Inside the van, she knew were the final remnants of the Falcone gang, wrists and legs immobilized and mouths taped. And because she made them strip down to their underwear before tossing them in the van, they were also shirtless and pantless...

Alfred and Leslie stood helplessly by. Leslie had finally convinced Bruce to put Dick to bed so that he could be made as comfortable as possible. She was about to help change his clothes, but Bruce waved her away.

"No," he said. "This is my job."

Leslie felt her heart breaking as she watched Bruce carefully and lovingly remove Dick's street clothes and replace them with his favorite Star Wars pajamas. When done, he lay his boy down and gently tucked all the covers around him.

Unable to bear being apart from him, Bruce lay next to his son on top of the covers. Feather soft fingertips explored the miracle of his

boy's face, his nose, cheek, and chin.

"I'm here, Dick," Bruce said softly. "I won't leave you, son. I was never truly alive until the day you came into my life. You're the reason I was put on this Earth, Dick. To hold you and keep you safe."

Bruce felt the tears start. "Someone please tell me how to keep my son safe. How do I keep the shadows away? Oh, God, how do I save my son?"

Like Alfred earlier, Bruce didn't know when he started articulating what he'd been feeling inside, but eventually he spoke to Dick about nothing and everything...

Bruce woke to terror. Leslie was performing CPR on Dick. Alfred was insistently urging him to move out of the way to let her work. Leslie stopped to check for any progress. Dick's breaths came in ragged gasps, a struggle for what little air he was getting.

Leslie was connecting him once again to the life support machines to help him breathe easier. Soon, Bruce could hear the steady, rhythmic in and out sound of mechanical breathing.

Feeling dissociated from what was happening, Bruce ironically noticed that as Dick started sinking further and further away from him, the eastern skies began to go from black to gray to blue.

Soon the first rays of sunlight could be seen peeking over the hilly woodline. As if two separate people, Bruce watched Leslie work on Dick, heard her urgent cries to keep fighting.

At the same time, Bruce marveled at how quickly the night was retreating from the rapidly advancing sun. He could actually see the day race across the dew-covered, manicured grounds.

Bruce heard Leslie as if in a water tunnel, her voice muffled and distorted. "Come on, Dick!" Leslie cried. "You can make it. Come on, honey! Fight this thing!"

I should be paying attention, Bruce thought. He began to concentrate on what Leslie was saying. This isn't right, he thought. Suddenly, Bruce felt as if he'd just snapped awake. He could hear Leslie clearly, and he understood the meaning behind the words.

They were losing Dick. Watching as she worked on Dick's small body, Bruce finally had enough.

"Stop!" he shouted. "No more!" He shoved Leslie aside and turned off the cold, infernal machines. Bending down, he gently wrapped Dick in his blankets, and lifted him up in his arms.

"But, Bruce--"

"You said it yourself!" Bruce said harshly. "There's nothing more we can do." He looked down at the deathly pale boy in his arms. "If I'm going to lose Dick forever, then I want to hold him for as long as I still have him."

He carried Dick over to the French doors and stepped out into the

balcony.

"Dick, I wish you could see this day, son. It's just an ordinary day. Like any other, but there's not a cloud in the sky, and I can hear the robins singing in the woods. I can smell the perfume from the rose garden all the way up here. And the sun is just about to reach your balcony and bedroom windows."

As he spoke, the first rays touched his son's cheek. Soon, they were bathed in the warmth of the morning, kissed by a soft breeze that began to stir. Bruce gently nuzzled his cheek to Dick's.

"You like waking up to the morning sun, don't you?"

"Sure do," a weak whisper below him answered. Startled, Bruce looked down at Dick's exhausted eyes. They were looking up at him, puzzled.

"Your cheek feels scratchy..." Dick protested faintly.

"Dick--?" Overwhelmed, Bruce went down on his knees, holding Dick closely, his chest wracked by harsh sobs. "Dick--!"

"Master Bruce--?" Alfred, believing the worst, bent over Bruce, keeping a tight rein on his own grief, determined to offer his strength to him. "Please, sir. It's time to come in."

"Alfred...?" a tired voice rasped, startling the older man. "Why's Bruce crying?"

"Master Dick--?" Stunned, Alfred thought the world had suddenly tilted on its axis. Unable to hold his weight, his legs gave way. Alfred collapsed next to Bruce and Dick and held them both to him. Unashamed tears of relief and love flowed freely...

End of Part 4 (Continues in Part 5--coming soon!)

5. (Part 5)

Author: Syl Francis

>Email: efrancis@earthlink.net
Title: Robin, the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale]

>Rating: PG
Part 5

>

>
Summary: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's...Robin?! Part 5 contains Chapters 21-

>26, plus the Epilogue. The conclusion to the series: Robin survives his first
exposure to Kryptonite, but will he survive Ra's Al Ghul's diabolical plans for
>him? Tune in, Bat-fans!

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>an original story that does not intend to infringe on their copyright.

>Feedback is welcome!

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>****

>Robin: the Boy of Steel [An Elseworlds Tale]
By Syl Francis

>
Chapter Twenty-One

>
"Bruce?" Dick's raspy voice sounded frightened. "What's the matter?"

>
Bruce's tear-streaked countenance smiled down at him. "Nothing, son. Everything

>is fine, now." Touching his forehead to Dick's, Bruce closed his eyes
momentarily, sending a silent prayer of thanks. He felt Alfred's warm hand on

>his shoulder, squeezing sympathetically.

>Bruce stood, mindful of his precious bundle. "Don't worry, Dick. We'll have you
back in your own bed in no time," he said.

>
"Bed--?" Dick whispered. "But I just woke up..."

>
Bruce felt his throat tighten. Despite his weakness, Dick sounded feisty.

>Bruce's mouth quirked slightly. He carefully laid the sick boy in bed and tucked
the blankets all around him.

>
"Hey, who's the boss?" he asked, his voice gently caressing.

>
As Bruce arranged the pillows, Dick looked up at him, blinking slowly as if

>having trouble with the meaning behind the words. Finally, his mouth formed the
barest ghost of a sleepy, lopsided grin.

>
"You are," he whispered.

>
His heart filling with happiness, Bruce continued the game. "Who makes the

>rules?"

>"You do..." Dick said softly, his eyes fluttering

>"Who loves you more than..." Bruce's voice caught. He bent down and kissed his
son on the forehead. "...more than anything in the world?"

>
"You..." Dick said, and dropped off...

>

>
"I don't understand," Leslie said, shaking her head. "Dick's entire immune

>system was in total arrest. Don't get me wrong, Bruce. But why isn't he dead?"

>Bruce looked up from the blood samples he was studying. Nothing made sense. The
original blood samples had succumbed entirely to the radiation poisoning. Under

>the electron microscope they were pulsing with the now familiar sickly green.

>Bruce ran his hand through his hair. It was past noon and he still hadn't been
to bed. Dick was sleeping soundly. He'd even been able to take a little broth

>earlier. He'd shown steady improvement throughout the morning; however, since
noon he'd remained about the same. He was still extremely weak, barely able to

>hold his head up without assistance.

>"I don't know, Doc," Bruce admitted. "The data tells us nothing except that Dick
should be dead. And yet, he isn't--for which I'm grateful. But, what do we do

>now?"

>"Start over," Leslie said. "Run new blood tests, use the old samples as the
control. I hate to do this to him, but we should probably draw samples at least

>once an hour to track his progress." She sighed. "And if I weren't so completely
exhausted, I would've suggested that already."

>
Leslie pinned Bruce with a tired stare. "For now, all we can do, Bruce, is keep
>him comfortable. And *you* should get some rest. You're no good to Dick this
way." She walked up to where he was sitting hunched over, and gently took his
>face in her hands. Bending down, she kissed him tenderly on the forehead.

>"You, Dick, and Alfred are all the family I have, Bruce. Call me selfish, but I
don't want to lose any of you. We all had a terrible fright last night. We're
>exhausted and not functioning at full capacity. A good night's sleep will help
clear the cobwebs. Who knows, maybe the answer is right in front of us, but our
>brains are too foggy to see it."

>Bruce nodded in reluctant agreement. He stood, too, and placing his arm around
Leslie's small waist, he walked upstairs with her.

>
"Let's look in on him, Bruce," Leslie suggested. Bruce nodded.

>
The gloomy interior emphasized that Dick's room was a sick chamber. Earlier with
>the sun streaming in, it had seemed more hopeful somehow, but now with the
shades drawn, it'd grown depressing.
>
Bruce walked over to Dick's bed and sat on the side. The youngster appeared
>weaker than before.

>"Leslie, I don't like the way he looks," Bruce said worriedly. "You don't think
he might be having a relapse?"
>
Leslie answered by opening her medical bag and taking out her stethoscope. She
>checked Dick's vitals and didn't like what she saw. Dick *was* weaker than he'd
been this morning.
>
"Bruce, he's slipping. I suggest we set up the monitoring equipment again. Just
>in case," she added.

>"Let's get some light in here," Bruce growled. "It looks like a morgue!" With
angry movements, he drew the curtains and blinds to let in the day. Because the
>room was facing east, the afternoon sun wasn't streaming in.

>"I don't understand, Leslie. He was improving steadily this morning. What
happened?"
>
Leslie shook her head and shrugged helplessly. "I just don't know, Bruce. I
>don't know." She turned to look down at Dick's pinched face.

>Bruce walked to the French doors, his hands deep in his pockets. After all this,
could he still lose Dick? It seemed impossible.

>
"Master Bruce?" Alfred stood respectfully at the door. "Sir, should I inform
>Miss Selina? She would wish to be told, I believe."

>"Tell her what?" Bruce asked quietly. "That Dick may be dying and we don't know
the reason? That I can't take him to a hospital, because--excuse me--but his
>alien physiology might give away the fact that he isn't quite human?" Bruce
pinned Alfred with a cold glare.
>
"Should we tell her that he's been accidentally poisoned by a rock that I

>stupidly left where it could be reached by a curious child with no warnings of
its being a potential hazard?"

>
"Sir, you didn't know. You mustn't blame yourself!"

>
"The *hell* I can't!" Bruce stopped, working through the passions that were

>threatening to consume him. "I'd just told him...*told* him, that it was my job
to love and protect him. But now when he needs me, *really* needs me to come

>through for him, I've failed him."

>"Bruce, Alfred's right. You can't blame yourself. Household accidents happen. No
one's to blame."

>
"I know," Bruce said quietly. "But it doesn't help." He stepped out into the

>balcony and breathed in the warm summer air. "I should've let him play out here
more often," he said. "Let him fly up there in the clouds with the sun shining

>on him. Dick loves to play outside, Leslie. Did you know that? He told me once
that it made him feel all sunshiny on the inside." Bruce grinned. "All sunshiny

>on the inside," he repeated.

>"But I wouldn't let him. Rule number one...no daylight flying where you might be
seen." A bright red cardinal flew across the vast lawn at this moment and

>alighted on the giant maple. "Yet, if Dick were a *normal* kid with a special
gift for playing the piano, I would never have denied him. I would've encouraged

>him, in fact--"

>"Master Bruce!" Alfred interrupted. Bruce looked at him, surprised. "I
apologize, sir, but what you just said about Master Dick playing outside! How

>did he describe it again?"

>"What? That it made him feel all 'sunshiny' inside," Bruce repeated. "I thought
it was cute," he added, shrugging.

>
"Sir, Dr. Leslie, if I might be so bold, but could that be the answer?"

>
"What? Could what be the answer?" Bruce asked blankly.

>
"Sir, remember the young master's sleepwalking episode?"

>
"Of course."

>
"Do you remember Master Dick's condition the following morning?"

>
Bruce nodded. "He complained of a headache."

>
"Yes, and do you remember that I gave him two children's aspirin?"

>
Bruce nodded again. "So, what's your point?"

>
"Sir, I remember distinctly that almost within seconds of taking the aspirin,

>Master Dick reported his headache gone. But that's not possible. The aspirins
can't take effect that quickly."

>
"I still don't understand what you're trying to get at, Alfred," Bruce said,

>confused. By now Leslie was also paying close attention to what Alfred was
saying.

>
"Sir, I remember the morning as if it were yesterday. It's a memory that's

>remained indelibly imprinted. I remember how the sky looked when the sun began
to rise. How the winter landscape looked with the sun gleaming upon it. But more

>importantly, I remember that because Master Dick was feeling ill,

you'd sat him
on your lap. It was the first time you'd ever done that. You were comforting him
>as naturally as any father would, and I remember thinking that perhaps, now--
well, never mind what I was thinking." Alfred waved his hand as if erasing his
>words.

>"I remember that the sunlight finally reached the kitchen bow windows and came
streaming in. You and Master Dick were clearly outlined in a bright sunbeam.
>Master Bruce, it was a wondrous sight to behold. And that's why I never forgot
it."
>
Leslie and Bruce exchanged strange looks and then turned back to him. This time
>it was Leslie who spoke.

>"Alfred, what are trying to say? Is there something significant to what you're
telling us? I mean, besides it being a beautiful memory?"
>
Alfred sighed exasperatedly. "Don't you see? As soon as you were bathed in the
>sunlight, Master Dick announced that his headache was gone. Almost to the
second." He looked at each one in turn. "The same thing happened here. Master
>Dick was near death, but as soon as he was bathed in sunshine, he took a turn
for the better."
>
Leslie and Bruce looked stunned at Alfred's words. The implications were
>astonishing.

>"But how could the *sun* be responsible?" Leslie asked. "I mean, it's only white
light. We've exposed Dick *and* the blood samples to white light all night long.
>It's made no difference whatsoever."

>"I can't explain that, of course," Alfred said. "Perhaps there's something
specific to sunlight--"
>
"Waitamminute," Bruce interrupted. "When Dick's told us about his dreams, he's
>mentioned a world with red skies. All this time, I was picturing a sky like ours
during sunset. You know, a star that doesn't rise far above the horizon. But
>what if--? What if, he's describing a planet with red skies, because--"

>"--Because it has a *red* sun?" Alfred finished. "Sir, isn't a red star an older
star? Perhaps even a dying star?"
>
Bruce nodded. "I've assumed that Dick's powers were indigenous to his people.
>That his flying ability was maybe a result of our planet's lighter gravity. But
lighter gravity wouldn't really explain an ability to fly, just jump farther and
>higher."

>"Sir, I don't believe that Master Dick has ever mentioned that the people of his
planet were anything other than normal. Much as we are."
>
Bruce held up his hand, as if thinking.
>
"Normal," Bruce repeated. "His people were normal." Turning excitedly, he
>addressed Leslie.

>"Doc--theory: Let's say that Dick comes from a planet that had a much heavier
gravity than Earth's and revolved around a red star. His home world was part of
>a much older, dying star system. Perhaps the star itself was getting ready to go
nova and its own internal instability affected the

planets around it--I don't
>know, maybe caused some kind of gravity spatial anomaly or
something--and this
resulted in Krypton exploding."
>
Leslie joined in. "If the key is the sun, then perhaps Dick's
people were
>'normal' because the light from the red star was too weak to produce
these
incredible powers that Dick has here on Earth."

>
"Sunshiny inside," Bruce murmured to himself. "Dick *feels*
sunshiny inside...I
>thought he meant that sunshine made him feel happy, but what if--?
Doc, are you
thinking what I'm thinking?"
>
"I'm not sure, Bruce, but let's try it anyway...!"
>

>
By mid-afternoon Dick was sitting up and looking almost like his
former self.
>Alfred had set up a chaise lounge on the poolside patio. Prior to
taking him
outside, Leslie had drawn four tubes of blood. Once
Dick was outside for an
>hour, she'd drawn another four tubes.

>As soon as she had them, she hurried downstairs to the cave and
began to work.
Bruce stayed outside with Dick, refusing to leave
his side.
>
With each hour that passed, Leslie wordlessly drew another four
samples from the
>boy. Dick slept through most of the ministrations, stirring on
occasion,
murmuring softly in his sleep.
>
"Bruce--? Dad--?" he mumbled, his face troubled. "Daddy--?"

>
"I'm here, son," Bruce said softly. Hesitating slightly, he
choked, "Daddy's
>here. I won't leave you, son. I promise."

>Dick's face smoothed out, becoming relaxed. As Bruce sat over him,
he was
startled by the miraculous transformation. Within minutes
of being outside in
>the sun, Dick's deathly pallor began to gain its normal rosy
coloring. His
breathing grew steadier, stronger...
>

>
When Dick woke, the first thing he saw was Bruce leaning over
him, his dark blue
>eyes smiling softly. Fuzzy from sleep, still weak from his illness,
Dick smiled
back.
>
"Hey, partner," Bruce greeted. "How're you feeling?"
>
Dick realized he was parched from thirst. And starving. Blinking
at Bruce, he
>tried to answer him but couldn't.

>Bruce instantly had a glass of water next to him. He solicitously
held a straw
up to Dick's dry lips and helped him sip.

>
"Better?" Bruce asked. Dick nodded gratefully.
>
"Uh-huh," he said softly. Looking around, he was surprised to
see that he was
>lying outside by the pool. "What--? Why--?"

>"Later," Bruce said gently. "Are you hungry?"

>Dick nodded. Talking was too tiring.

>"Good. Alfred's fixed you some of his special chicken soup and
homemade bread.
What do you think? Would you like some?"

>
Smiling slightly, Dick nodded again.
>
"Did I hear someone mention 'Chicken soup'?" Alfred asked. He

placed a fully
>laden tray down on a poolside table. Beaming at Dick, he uncovered
the soup
tureen and started to serve the patient a generous
portion.
>
Dick tried to reach for the soup bowl, but found that his arms
felt too heavy to
>lift. Inexplicably he felt like crying and tears suddenly started to
fall down
his cheeks. What was wrong with him, he wondered?

>
Bruce saw the tears right away, and gently took Dick into his
arms. "Hey,
>munchkin, everything's going to be all right," he murmured. Dick
nodded, gaining
comfort from being held. "Here, why don't we
raise your lounge so's you can sit
>up a bit more?"

>As Bruce said this, Alfred adjusted the chaise lounge. Bruce then
gently sat
Dick back, drawing the light blanket around his
shoulders.
>
"There," Bruce said, sitting back. "Now, you let *me* do all the
work. You just
>eat and enjoy, understand?"

>Dick nodded. "'Kay."

>****

>Bruce sat by Dick all afternoon. As the shadows started growing, he
felt a
growing fear inside. What if this wasn't working? What if
Dick needed continuous
>exposure to the sun, and now that the sun was going down he'd have a
relapse?
Could he survive another night like last night?

>
Dick was resting again. A light evening breeze ruffled his dark
hair. He looked
>so peaceful. Perhaps everything was going to be all right after all.
Bruce
suddenly felt someone's eyes on him. Looking over his
shoulder, he saw Leslie
>leaning against the open door.

>She was smiling.

>Bruce instantly felt a stab of hope.

>Leslie nodded at him. Moving from the open door, she walked up to
Bruce who
stood immediately and gratefully fell in her arms. All
the worry, all the fear,
>all the terror of the past twenty hours washed over him. He allowed
her to hold
him once again, to comfort him like that time so long
ago in a dark alley. A
>dark night when he'd lost all that he'd held dear to him.

>Bruce allowed himself to cry softly on her shoulder once again.

>"Thank you, Leslie," he whispered in soft sobs. "Thank you."

>Gently taking his face in her hands, Leslie kissed him tenderly on
the cheek.
"We have a very special boy here, Bruce. Very
special." She smiled. "'Sunshiny
>inside' indeed." Her smile broadened. "It's nothing short of
miraculous. With
each hour of being exposed to the sunlight, his
blood built stronger and
>stronger resistance to the radiation. Each subsequent exposure
produced a weaker
and weaker attack on his system."
>
Bruce looked at her, hope in his eyes. "Does this mean that he's
immune to it?"
>
Leslie regretfully shook her head. "No. Not exactly. Constant

exposure brings on
>the blood poisoning; however, when the radiation source is removed,
his natural
immunosystem kicks in, and he comes to a full
recovery. With each subsequent
>exposure and removal of the radiation source, the recovery comes
faster."

>Leslie bent over Dick who was slumbering and kissed him gently on
the forehead.
"You're the closest thing to a grandson I have,
sweetheart. Thank you for
>staying with us. You've made us all very happy." She smiled up at
Bruce.

>"Bruce, the closest that can I explain it--and believe me, this is
as near to
pseudo-science as I hope to ever get--is that Dick is
a living solar battery.
>His body absorbs sunlight and not unlike photosynthesis, turns it
into pure
energy. However, unlike plants that also produce
photosynthesis under artificial
>light, Dick *does not*! It's either the sunlight or nothing."

>Bruce looked at her solemnly and nodded in understanding. And then
looking down
at Dick, his mouth quirked in his usual half-smile.
"I guess this means that
>Robin will have to fly during the day more often..."

>****

>Chapter Twenty-Two

>"Hey! How's the patient?" Selina's cheerful voice immediately perked
Dick up. He
was lounging on a bench swing, which was located at
the edge of the sun-drenched
>garden. He was sitting up, watching the birds peck at breadcrumbs.
Selina came
up to him and kissed him tenderly on the cheek.

>
"How's my favorite guy?" she asked. She was wearing a light
yellow, linen
>sundress with a full skirt that fell below her knees and matching
sandals. She
was carrying a brown paper bag and a brightly
wrapped parcel. She placed them
>both next to the swing.

>Dick grinned goofily and blushed. "Awww...cut it out, Selina," he
protested.
Then without skipping a beat asked, "What's in the
package?"
>
Selina grinned, picking up the parcel.
>
"Here, munchkin. This is for you."
>
Dick took it, his young face expressing surprise. "But why? It
isn't even my
>birthday!"

>"Why? Just because," Selina said, leaning forward and playfully
rubbing her nose
to his.
>
"Just because--?" Dick asked, eyes smiling.
>
"Uh-huh," Selina said. "Just because I love you." She kissed him
on the
>forehead. "Now, go on. Open it."

>Dick nodded and eagerly tore through the wrapping. Opening the box,
he found a
catcher's mitt. Eyes wide, he said, "Whoa...an
official All-Stars commemorative
>glove. How'd you get it?"

>Selina smiled impishly. "I have my ways. But that's not all that's
in there.
There's a card, too. Go on, read it."
>
Dick did as told. There were four tickets inside with a note
written in a lovely
>feminine hand.

>/Happy 'Just Because,' Dick! Enclosed are four tickets to this year's Baseball
>All-Stars Game to be held in Gotham Stadium. You are about to make three other
people very happy. Choose them wisely.
Enjoy!--Selina//
>
"The All-Stars Game!" Dick cried excitedly, his mouth gaping.
"Whoa...! Even
>*Bruce* couldn't get tickets. The game's been sold out for months! How'd you
do it, Selina?"
>
Selina smiled her enigmatic smile. "Ask me no secrets," she said tickling him
>gently on the ribs. "I'll tell you no lies." Dick giggled happily, struggling
only half-heartedly...
>
A few minutes later, Alfred found them together on the swing. Selina was sitting
>up, her feet gently pushing the swing back and forth. Dick lay stretched out on
the swing, his head on her lap. He was slamming his small fist into a baseball
>mitt. Another glove was lying, ignored, on top of a brown paper bag. Selina was
gently running her hand through Dick's dark hair.

>
Dick was talking. "Do you *really* know how to hit a curve ball?" he asked.
>
"Of course. You're talking to the champion shortstop of Madame Dutetre's
>Finishing School for Girls' softball team."
>"Awww...you're making that up!" Dick said, looking skeptical.

>"Cross my heart," Selina insisted. "Of course, I was the shortstop *and* pitcher
and catcher *and* the entire outfield!" she added with a low chuckle. "There
>weren't too many softball enthusiasts in Europe. They're more into soccer."
>Dick laughed at her silliness, and then asked seriously, "So who was the first
baseman?"
>
"That's right," Selina said straight faced.
>
"No, I asked who was on first?" Dick said.
>
"That's right," Selina repeated, smiling. She looked up at Alfred and winked.
>Alfred raised a single eyebrow at the old joke.
>Dick turned to look at her, slightly put out. "I asked you *what* was the name
of the first baseman!" His tone took on the air of someone speaking to a very
>dense individual.
>"No, What was on second base," Selina said, answering in kind.

>Dick grimaced. "*I* don't know!" Dick protested.
>Selina could see that he wanted to say something rude, but his innate respect
for his elders kept him from doing it. Alfred chuckled softly. He was setting
>out a light snack.
>"I Don't Know was on third," Selina said earnestly. Alfred looked away, covering
his mouth.
>
Dick looked at the both of them accusingly. "You're picking on me," he said
>sounding hurt.
>"I'm sorry, Dick," Selina apologized, with a slight laugh. "But I thought you
said that you were a baseball fan."
>
"I *am*!" Dick insisted.
>
"Have you ever heard of Abbot and Costello?"

>
"Were they ball players?" Dick asked seriously.
>
"I have an idea, Miss Selina," Alfred said. "Might I suggest that you fill
>Master Dick with tales of the famous duo over this light repast?" He indicated
the snack he'd just laid out for them.
>
"I think, Alfred, that that's an excellent idea," Selina agreed. "Come on,
>munchkin. Take a seat."

>Dick nodded, feeling piqued. He still tired easily, but he was doing much
better. The wedding was tomorrow, and they were all holding their breaths.
>
"Now, Dick, if you wanted to know the name of the first baseman, what would you
>ask?" Her expression was completely guileless. Dick shrugged and innocently
played into her hands.
>
"I already asked you," he said exasperatedly. "Who's on first?"

>

>
"That's it, Dick," Selina called. She was crouched, holding a catcher's mitt out
>for the ball. Her dress formed a bright yellow circle underneath her. "Right
here! You can do it!"
>
Dick assumed his best pitcher's stance and *threw*!
>
He threw a little too hard. When the ball *slammed* into Selina's mitt, she
>tumbled backwards about a foot.

>"Selina!" he cried, running to her. "Are you all right?" he asked, helping her
up.
>
She waved her hand, indicating she wasn't hurt. "I'm okay, Dick," she said,
>slightly dazed. "Just landed on my dignity." She looked up at up at him. "That's
some fast ball you've got there, munchkin. I think the Gotham Griffins are
>looking for a new pitcher. Maybe you should go to their open tryouts next
spring."
>
Dick grinned, embarrassed. He went suddenly still, as if listening.
>
"Bruce!" he cried. "It's Bruce!"
>
"I don't hear anything--" Selina said, and then heard it, too--the distinct
>sound of the Wayne Enterprises' helicopter.

>Dick jumped up and began running towards the waiting area by the landing zone.
As he ran, Selina smiled.
>
"I guess you *are* going to be all right after all." Rising slowly, she began
>walking towards the waiting area. As the helicopter came in for a landing, Dick
looked beside himself with excitement, as if he hadn't seen Bruce in over a
>month.

>Selina stood back slightly, not wanting to intrude on what would be their
moment.
>
Dick began waving madly before Bruce even emerged from the helicopter. As soon
>as the helicopter started lifting, Bruce started towards Dick. Dick unable to
contain himself began running towards his dad. As Selina watched, Dick ran up to
>Bruce who lifted him up and swung him around, both laughing and hugging, happy
at the reunion.
>
Walking up to the waiting area, Selina watched, her eyes stinging. Whatever

>illness had struck the Boy of Steel, it had to have been serious.
Bruce and
Alfred had both looked haunted during the past few
days, afraid of how close
>they'd come to losing the boy.

>"Selina!"

>She blinked the tears away that had been threatening and looked up,
smiling.
Dick was waving excitedly. Bruce still held him in his
arms. As they walked up
>to her, she moved towards them.

>"...And she was showing me how to throw and catch!" Dick was saying.
He held up
his mitt for emphasis.
>
"Wow!" Bruce said, sounding impressed. "I think we've found the
perfect woman,
>Dick--one who likes sports!" He leaned over and kissed her softly on
the lips.
Dick watched from his vantage point between them,
grinning happily. Looking
>Selina in the eyes, Bruce added, "Talk about a dream come true."

>Setting Dick down, Bruce took Selina's arm and all three began
walking towards
the house.
>
"Oh! I almost forgot, Bruce," Dick said holding up the tickets.
"Look at what
>else she gave me--just because!" He held up the four tickets. Bruce
took them,
his eyes widening.
>
"Just because'?" Bruce echoed distractedly. "The All-Stars
Game?"
>
"Uh-huh. Just because she loves me," Dick said smugly. "She said
I can pick
>anyone I want to go with me, too." Looking at them both askance, he
added slyly,
"Too bad you'll be out of town, huh?" He snatched
the tickets back.
>
"Out of town?" Bruce echoed as if not quite understanding what
was happening. He
>looked at Selina with stunned respect. His eyes asked, 'How'd you
get them?'
Selina smiled, shrugging condescendingly.

>
"Sure. You'll be on your honeymoon, remember?" Dick said
casually. "I guess I'll
>have to ask Commissioner Gordon to go with me. You think Mr. Fox
would like to
go? I'll ask Alfred, too." Turning, he skipped into
the house.
>
Bruce stood still, watching his boy as he disappeared inside. He
turned to
>Selina. "All-Stars tickets?" he mumbled dazedly.

>Her emerald eyes sparkled in amused affection. "Since Dick won't be
going with
us on our honeymoon, I thought I'd give him
something--*small*--to make it up to
>him."

>"All-Stars tickets?" Bruce repeated, emphasizing each word. He felt
her fingers
lightly going up his chest. A warm tingle began to
spread inside him as he again
>gazed into her eyes.

>"Don't worry, Bruce," Selina said huskily. "I'll make it up to you,
too. I
promise." She stood on her tiptoes and whispered in his
ear.
>
Bruce felt himself suddenly blushing, a slight smile struggling
to break out of
>the corner of his mouth. Looking deeply into her eyes, Bruce felt as
if he were
falling without a safety line. He knew at that moment
that he'd love Selina for

>the rest of his life.

>Standing in the late afternoon sun, Selina's yellow dress flowing softly around
both their legs, Bruce took her gently into his arms and they kissed...

>

>
Selina hummed to herself as she walked up the hallway to her hotel room.

>Tomorrow she'd be Mrs. Bruce Wayne, and Dick's Mom. Could she be any happier?
She smiled with anticipation. There was so much to do before tomorrow.

>
She still had five more stops to do tonight. Once done, she'd have returned all

>of the stolen jewelry. She paused at her door. How did she feel about that?
Recalling Dick's happy smile today, and Bruce's knee-watering kiss, she knew the

>answer.

>Turning the key in the lock, she stepped into the entranceway. Flicking the
lights, she was momentarily startled when they didn't come on.

>
Sighing, she felt her way to the living area and flipped another light switch.

>Still nothing.

>"That's strange," she muttered. Instantly, she knew. Standing perfectly still,
Selina knew she wasn't alone. "Not again," she said exasperatedly. "Boys, I

>thought I told Falcone that--"

>She was grabbed from behind. How--? No one had *ever* sneaked up behind her. She
remained cool, listening with all of her senses. The person behind her was

>*huge*--bigger even than Bruce.

>Okay, this wasn't one of Falcone's goons. No problem. Selina Kyle could take
care of herself under *any* circumstances.

>
Stomping down with her foot, Selina bent forward and threw her surprised captor

>over her head. She heard a yelp of surprise. Selina didn't stay in place. As
soon as she'd thrown him, she'd vaulted over a bookcase that she knew was to her

>left. Landing at a crouch, Selina rolled until she found herself next to the
door leading to the bedroom.

>
Her whip. She had to get to it. Meanwhile, she reached into her small handbag,

>and took out her lipstick. Opening it from the bottom end, she threw it across
the room.

>
It made a soft ~whoomph~ as it hit the wall on the opposite side. Darn! It was

>her favorite color, she thought. Entering her bedroom, she made her way quickly
to where she kept her cat-o'-nine tails.

>
She was hit from behind with the force of a Mack truck.

>
"Oof!" she grunted, falling forward.

>
"Not a very lady-like sound," a taunting voice said over her. Selina was kicked

>again, this time across the jaw. She saw stars momentarily. "But then, you're
nothing but a common *thief*--!"

>
Selina felt another kick, her ribs. She felt herself losing consciousness.

>
"You do not deserve him," a cold, feminine voice said. "I will not let you come

>between me and my beloved."

>Beloved? Selina felt her blood boil. "That's what *you* think!" She kicked out,
connecting with her mysterious opponent's abdomen.

>
"Urk!" came a gagging sound.

>
"Not very lady-like," Selina jeered. She'd dived for her hiding place and

>retrieved her whip. Cracking it menacingly, she waited. "Okay, girlie, come and
eat it!"

>
A soft ~pfpwpt~ sound to her left, startled her. She felt a sharp, stinging pain

>at her side.

>"Wha--?" she gasped. Her numbed fingers released their hold on her whip. Her
mouth opened, working to say more, but she couldn't articulate her words. The

>room started spinning crazily. The lights from the city below strobed eerily in
a wild staccato.

>
Drugged--! Her mind screamed.

>
Selina felt herself going down, her knees giving way. She was confused, fuzzy.

>The lights in the room suddenly came on. Selina looked around her, trying to
focus. She found herself on a merry-go-round looking up.

>
A face swam into focus, immediately above her. Cold amethyst eyes looked down at

>her, set off against beautiful, exotic features. Selina tried to lift her arm to
reach her mysterious opponent, but couldn't move.

>
"I am sorry to have interfered, mistress," a deep, masculine voice said from

>somewhere out of Selina's line of sight.

>"That is quite all right, Ubu," the woman above Selina replied.

"Felines are
notoriously difficult to handle, and the Kyle woman is no exception." She smiled

>down at Selina. "Besides, I read a veterinary report once that said it's better
to drug a cat before boarding a plane. That way it'll travel more comfortably.

>Enjoy your trip, Cat."

>Selina lost consciousness...

>****

>She woke up to a confusion of loud voices, flashbulbs, and cold metal handcuffs
being snapped on her wrists. Where was she? What was happening?

>
"What--?" she gasped, dazed. The drugs still hadn't completely worn off. There

>were more than a dozen men in police uniforms around her. A heavy, rumpled man
with a vile cigar jammed in the side of his mouth was barking orders.

>
"Make sure those handcuffs are on tight," he growled. "The Catwoman has been

>known to escape before."

>"What's going on here?" Selina asked, barely able to focus from the flashbulbs
going off in her eyes.

>
"Commissioner!" a plain-clothed officer walked up, carrying Selina's cosmetic

>case. "We've got it, sir. Look!" He opened it, displaying a dazzling array of
jewels. Selina gasped. There was more in there than should have been.

>
A sealed envelope fluttered out. She looked at it, struggling to focus through

>her blurred vision. It was addressed to--?

>No! Selina shook her head. It couldn't be. It wasn't true!

>A pair of scuffed shoes swam into her line of vision, stopping less than an inch
from the envelope. A hand encased in surgical gloves, picked it up. Gordon's
>exhausted eyes steadily gazed into hers. Shaking his head sadly, he turned away.

>"Read her her rights, Bullock," he said tiredly.

>"Sure 'nuff, Commish," Bullock answered. "Selina Kyle, you are under arrest on
several counts of burglary. You have the right to remain silent. You have the
>right to an attorney..."

>****

>Flash forward three years...

>Bruce sat in the Batcave remembering the days and weeks that followed.

>Selina's weak denials...

>"Yes! I'm the Catwoman," she cried desperately, holding her hands out
pleadingly. "But you have to *believe* me, Bruce! I was returning it all--!"
>
"And my mother's pearl necklace? When did you take that? The night we made
>love?"

>"No--! Bruce...please! I never took your mother's necklace. It was planted on
me."
>
"By who? Commissioner Gordon? The GCPD?" Bruce turned away, unable to look at
>her anymore. "I *loved* you. *Trusted* you. And you betrayed me. Betrayed us--me
and Dick." He paused at the holding cell's visitors' entrance. "Goodbye,
>Selina..."

>Selina's trial, more denials...

>"Yes, I stole! Yes, I took the jewels, but I was returning them. I swear--!"

>"If that's the case, Miss Kyle," Harvey Dent interrupted. "How do you explain
being found at the airport, with the jewels *and* a one-way ticket to Rio on
>you?"

>"I was drugged," Selina said tiredly. "I've told you this before. *She* drugged
me."
>
"Ah, yes," Dent said. "Your mysterious woman visitor and her giant assistant.
>Miss Kyle, I'm afraid that the people of Gotham will need a little something
more substantial than wild tales about the wicked witch of the west and her
>bogey-man friend in order to acquit you."

>"Objection, your honor! The Prosecution is badgering the witness!"

>"Objection sustained. Mr. Dent, do you have any more questions of the
defendant?"
>
"No, your honor. I believe that the Prosecution has made its point."
>
Bruce stared at Selina from where he sat in the back of the courtroom. She sat,
>head bowed, hair falling loosely and covering her face. She was the picture of
broken dejection. Bruce wanted to take her in his arms, to comfort her, tell her
>everything was going to be all right.

>And then the cold, burning anger that had begun to take hold when Gordon first
showed him Selina's cosmetics case threatened to consume him. This was followed

>closely by the recollection of the letter with its cutting, hurtful words.
Unconsciously, he squeezed the armrest next to him, the force of his strength
>warping it.

>"The defendant is excused," the judge stated. Selina nodded mutely and slowly
returned to her seat.
>
"The Prosecution rests, your honor," Dent announced formally.

>
Bruce stood, and without a backward glance, walked out of the courtroom...
>
Bruce remembered...
>
Bruce and Dick left town on an extended trip unable to bear the catty whispers
>and gossipmongers...

>Bruce remembered...

>Dick crying at night in his sleep. His heartbreak causing the nightmares of his
parents' deaths to return with full force.

>
Bruce remembered...
>
Dick waking in his arms, sobbing for Selina.
>
"Why couldn't she love us like we loved her? Why did she lie, Bruce? Why...?"
>
Bruce remembered...
>
The long walks as he tried to work her out of his system. Everywhere he looked
>he was reminded of her. He listened for her laugh. He looked for the dazzling
emerald of her eyes. He filled his lungs, hoping for the scent of her perfume...
>
Bruce remembered...
>
Dick looking up him with his serious dark blue eyes and asking, "Should I hate
>her, Bruce? If you tell me to, I will..."

>Bruce remembered...

>"No, Dick," he'd said, his voice catching. "I don't want you to hate her. I
don't want you to hate anyone, son..."
>
Bruce remembered and closed his eyes. He brought his hand up to them, squeezing
>hard. Selina was back and with her all of the old hurts and feelings of
betrayal. She said she needed his help. That she was in trouble.
>
Straightening his shoulders, Bruce pulled on the cowl. Batman stood up and
>purposefully strode towards the Batmobile.

>Whatever trouble she was in, it could only lead to trouble for Batman and Robin.
If that were the case, then *Batman* was going to stop it before it happened...
>

>
Chapter Twenty-three
>
As he drove through the silent, darkened streets, Batman went back to the moment
>of truth with Gordon.

>He'd already suspected. No, he'd already known but had closed his eyes to it.
Watching her from afar as she returned the jewels, Batman had *known* that the
>Catwoman was Selina.

>Her moves, her silhouette, her sensuality. He'd only made love to her that one
time, but in that one night he'd committed himself, body and soul, to Selina.
>
He'd have recognized her anywhere.
>
But he refused to believe. Until the moment of truth. The moment

that Jim Gordon
>walked into his home, less than an hour away from his wedding. At
that moment,
he knew that he couldn't hide the truth any longer.

>
Batman remembered...

>

>
Selina's cosmetic case. The damning evidence. Even then, he'd
refused to
>believe. His mother's pearl necklace--his wedding gift for his new
bride.

>Even then, he'd held back judgment.

>And then, Gordon handed him the envelope. It was addressed to him,
in a
familiar, flowing, feminine hand. It had been opened
already, the contents read

>by others.

>Bruce took it in his hand, his fingers shaking slightly. His dark
eyes boring
into Gordon's, he pulled the letter out. Gordon broke
eye contact first, unable

>to look at his friend. It was written on a small stationary-sized
piece of
paper. The letterhead was that of the Gotham Regency,
Selina's hotel.

>
Bruce unfolded the letter and began to read:

>
//Darling Bruce, As you know by now, I'm long gone and in Rio.
Really, darling,

>it's for the best. I just don't see myself as the society matron
type, married
to the world's dumbest billionaire. And as for
being a mother to Dick, I'm

>certain that by now you've determined that I'm hardly the
Mommy-type. Bruce,
darling, you were wonderful in bed, but I've
had better. No hard feelings. Ta!

>Selina/

>
Bruce's jaw had worked as he struggled to control his growing
fury and

>humiliation.

>"Bruce, I--" Gordon began.

>"--Thank you, Jim," Bruce interrupted, crumpling the paper in his
hand. "I guess
you were right all along. I *was* a fool."

>
"Bruce?" Dick's small, scared voice called from the door.

"Bruce, what's the

>matter? Aren't we going to the church?"

>Gordon picked up the letter and envelope, and began to smooth out
the wrinkled
paper. He was about to place them in his inside
jacket pocket when Bruce spoke

>up.

>"Jim, I'd appreciate it if that letter wasn't used as evidence. It's
not just
me..." he let his voice trail off, his eyes darting
quickly towards Dick and

>back. Gordon stared at Bruce for a moment longer. Finally, he too
glanced at
Dick who was staring wide-eyed at the two of them.

>
With a slight shake of his head, Gordon placed the letter and
envelope in his

>inside jacket pocket. Taking the cosmetics case, he headed out the
door. Pausing
where Dick stood, he gently ran his hand along the
boy's cheek.

>
"I'm sorry, Bruce, but--" He shrugged helplessly. "--my hands
are tied."

>
After Gordon left, Dick stepped into the study. He looked at
Bruce with solemn

>blue eyes. His normally apricot complexion, so recently pale from illness, had
again lost its color.
>
"Bruce?" he whispered. "What is it?"
>
Unable to turn and face Dick, Bruce spoke with his back to him. Left hand
>covering his eyes, Bruce gave a short, forced laugh.

>"Ah, um, well, son," he said, struggling to keep his voice even. "There isn't
going to be a wedding after all."
>
"Why?" Dick asked. "Is Selina sick? Is she all right? Can we go see her?"
>
Bruce dropped his hand, his shoulders sagging. He shook his head. "No, son."
>She's not sick," he said. Bruce felt his jacket being yanked insistently from
below.
>
"Then why? Where *is* she? Doesn't she want to marry us anymore?"
>
At Dick's question, Bruce slowly went down to his knees and pulled his son to
>him, hugging him tightly.

>"No, Dick," he said, his voice slightly catching. "She won't be marrying us
after all."
>

>
Batman swung down from the GCPD Headquarters building rooftop. He paused briefly
>at the familiar window. About to go in, he was startled by Gordon's voice
addressing him from inside.
>
"I thought you'd be here," Gordon said without preamble. He picked up a manila
>folder that was lying on the middle of his desk. "Here's the file."

>Wordlessly, Batman climbed inside and took the proffered file. It was everything
the GCPD had on Selina Kyle. It wasn't much.

>
"Figured you'd be wanting it," Gordon continued blandly. He felt a soft breeze
>from the open window. Grimacing, he mumbled, "You're welcome."

>****

>Batman inspected the file in the Batmobile. Selina Kyle was an enigma. There
were no records of her birth, of her parents, or of any family members. No
>record of any known residences. Her passport was a forgery. Her fingerprints
produced no 'Knowns'.
>
No federal warrants. No Interpol warrants. Not even a ticket for jaywalking. But
>then, a person who doesn't exist can't be wanted by the authorities.

>"Who are you, Selina Kyle?" he muttered. It was almost as if she'd never existed
before she disembarked from her plane at Gotham International Airport. That is,
>if she'd even arrived by plane. There seemed to be no record of *that* either.

>The only solid lead was a photograph of Selina and a known federal fugitive
known as Jake 'the Fake' McCabe. According to Bullock's report, he'd followed
>McCabe until he'd entered the Falcone estate grounds.

>"So, we come full circle," Batman said. Falcone had provided Selina's defense
attorney. The photo showed that her ties to the Falcone organization ran even
>deeper.

>As he perused the file, a small stationary-sized piece of paper fell out. He
recognized the letterhead as that of the hotel that Selina had been staying in.

>About to give it a cursory glance, he realized that it was the same letter that
Gordon had shown him three years ago.

>
Steeling himself mentally, he forced himself to re-read it. His jaw clenched.

>The words hadn't lost any of their biting sting over the ensuing years. He was
about to crumple it once again, when he stopped. Abruptly, he punched a digital

>code into his onboard computer and instantly accessed the Batcomputer's memory
banks.

>
Holding the paper carefully, he put it through the onboard scanner.

>
~SCANNING COMPLETE~ The Batmobile's LCD screen flashed. Batman typed in a few

>more commands and hit 'Enter.' He returned the letter to the file folder, put
the Batmobile in gear, and then slammed his foot down on the accelerator as hard

>as he could.

>Tires screeching, the Batmobile roared into the Gotham City cool spring night.

>****

>Dick bolted awake, drenched in sweat. He was gasping for air. He brought his
knees up and laid his forehead on them for a moment. He looked around the room,

>lit dimly by the recessed illumination of a nightlight.

>What had he been dreaming about? Flashes of hot pits and demons rising came
unbidden. Beautiful, almond-shaped amethyst eyes haunted him. What had the dream

>been about?

>He tried to grasp the faint memory tendrils, but the dream was evaporating
already like morning fog.

>
"Get a grip, Grayson," he muttered. "Sheesh!" He fell back on the pillows,

>staring up the ceiling. His heart seemed to be back to its normal rhythm. "I
wonder what Selina wanted?" he murmured. "Bruce sure didn't seem happy to see

>her." He sighed unhappily.

>"Dick?" a sleepy voice said from below. A tousled red head looked up from the
pullout trundle bed. "Whuz'up?"

>
"Go back to sleep, Wally," Dick said. His best friend had been allowed to sleep

>over. Tomorrow they were going to catch the Gotham Griffins' opening game, a
birthday present from Bruce.

>
"Who was the dish, anyway, Dick?" Wally asked, ignoring Dick's command to go

>back to sleep.

>Dick knew Wally was talking about Selina. He sighed. "The 'dish,' as you call
her, came *this* close--" he said, holding out his thumb and forefinger, "--to

>becoming my new mother, about three years ago."

>"No kidding?" Wally was sitting up now. "What happened?"

>Dick looked away momentarily and then shrugged. "Nothing happened. Least of all,
the wedding. They called it off at the last minute. Today was the first day I've

>even *seen* Selina since then."

>"Wow," Wally whispered. "And neither one's married anyone else?"

>Dick shook his head. He didn't mention Selina's incarceration.

>"Funny, for a while there, Uncle Barry mentioned that your dad and Ms. Lance
were dating. What happened?"
>
Dick's eyes instantly grew cold. "I don't want to talk about it."
>
"No, really," Wally insisted. "I overheard Uncle Barry talking to Aunt Iris and
>he said that your dad and Ms. Lance were, like, 'made for each other.' Both
martial artists, crimefighters, you know?"
>
"I *said* I don't want to talk about it!" Dick said, and pushed off the bed,
>floating to the door.

>"Hey, Batboy!" Wally called. "I didn't mean nothing, honest." Dick flew out of
the room. "I thought you *liked* Black Canary," he added to himself.
>
Dick paused right outside his room, thinking back to those awful days. After the
>wedding had been cancelled and the trial over, Bruce never talked about Selina
again. Although Dick understood, not being allowed to talk about someone he
>loved had hurt deeply.

>Also, being forced to watch Bruce date other women had caused many long nights
of silence between father and son. But the woman who caused the greatest rift
>and threatened to come between them was Dinah Lance, the hero known as Black
Canary.
>
As much as Dick liked and admired Black Canary, when Bruce brought her home one
>evening for dinner, Dick threw a tantrum. It was too soon in his eyes. Losing
Selina so suddenly was almost like she'd died. He needed time to mourn her loss
>and felt Bruce turning so soon to another woman was tantamount to betrayal...

>****

>"That's the *second* time tonight, young man that you said something extremely
rude to Dinah!" Bruce said sternly. Throwing his napkin on the table, he stood,
>pushing his chair backwards. "I won't have you being disrespectful to my
friends." Dinah sat still, eyes shocked, her hand covering her mouth.
>
"Bruce, please--" she began.
>
"Apologize this instant, young man!" Bruce demanded, ignoring Dinah's efforts at
>peacekeeping.

>"I won't!" Dick yelled. Inadvertently, he flew straight up and hovered above the
expansive dining room.
>
"Richard John Grayson Wayne!" Bruce said in a cold voice. "You know the rules
>against the use of your powers in this house. Come down and apologize right
now!"
>
"*NO*! I *won't*! I *hate* her! You were supposed to love Selina, but you let
>her go to jail! I *hate* you! I *hate* you!" With that, Dick flew to his room
and threw himself on his bed. That night he cried himself to sleep.
>
The next day, at breakfast, Dick sat alone. Bruce was long-gone to the office.
>Unable to bear the loneliness and heartbreak he was feeling, Dick finally broke
down in front of Alfred. The loyal friend swept the boy in his arms and held him

>until his tears were spent.

>Dick didn't know if Alfred spoke to Bruce, but later that morning, while sitting
in his room, he heard the familiar sounds of the Wayne Enterprises' helicopter
>landing outside. He didn't run to greet his dad like he usually did, instead, he
walked outside and stood on the balcony, looking out as the aircraft pulled away
>again.

>A few minutes later, there was a soft knock at his door followed by its being
opened. Dick couldn't remember clearly what happened next, except that he ended
>up sobbing in Bruce's arms with both of them saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry,"
over and over...
>

>
The memory was still painful. Dick tried to accept that Bruce had to put his
>relationship with Selina behind him, but the boy couldn't deny his feelings. He
never stopped loving Selina. He didn't know why she did what she did, and he
>didn't care. He'd forgiven her long ago. Besides, it was in the past.

>Selina had served her time in prison and was out, free and clear. He wondered
about the reason behind her visit. Dick was sufficiently astute to realize that
>his birthday party was merely an excuse. Selina had been here today for a
reason.
>
Floating through Wayne Manor's darkened corridors, Dick's jaw took on the same
>determined look that Bruce's did during a particularly difficult case. Passing
by Alfred's suite, Dick listened carefully to make sure his beloved friend was
>sleeping soundly and then flew downstairs to the secret entrance.

>Accessing the hidden door, Dick flew into the Batcave. Flicking an array of
light switches, Dick floated, suspended in front of the spacecraft. Remembering
>what happened the *last* time he'd done this, Dick hesitated.

>"Come on, Chicken-boy," he chastised. "Bruce wouldn't have left anything that
could hurt you." He thought back over the past few years. Bruce had become even
>*more* protective after the scare with the mysterious mineral that they'd
dubbed, 'Kryptonite.'
>
Never mind the fact that Dick's powers were probably the most awesome of any of
>the new crop of superheroes that suddenly started springing like wildflowers all
over the place--
>
"Whoa!" Wally said next to him. Startled, Dick almost flew straight up into the
>Batcave's ceiling. "So *this* is the infamous Batcave. Awesome! Uncle Barry's
told me that *no one* except you guys has ever been inside it!"
>
Dick crossed his arms and looked quite put out.
>
"That was true up until about fifteen seconds ago. What's the matter with you?
>Bruce and your uncle *told* you that you couldn't go anywhere in the house
without permission. Especially, the Batcave! Don't you ever follow orders, or
>remember anything you've been told?"

>"Wow! What's this?" Wally asked totally ignoring Dick's question. He

was staring
at the spacecraft. "Is *this* what brought you here to Earth?" he asked.
>
Relenting, Dick nodded. "Yeah. It's just big enough to carry a baby." They both
>stared at it a moment longer.

>At this moment, the Batcomputer came online. Dick could see that it was
processing data that was being fed to it from a remote terminal. He quickly flew
>to the station and began flicking switches. Soon, he saw that something was
being scanned into it. Typing quickly, he accessed the information as it was
>being processed.

>In the next instant, he read for the first time, the letter that Commissioner
Gordon had shown Bruce all those years ago.

>

>
Dick sat at the computer station feeling as if he'd been kicked in the stomach.
>Selina had never loved them, after all. She'd planned to leave the whole time.
Everything she ever said to them was nothing but a lie.
>
"Hey, Dick," Wally said. "What is it? What happened?" Wally had been exploring
>the Batcave when Dick returned to the computer station and read the letter.

>"Nothing, Wally," he said sadly. "Just that...just that--" he stopped, unable to
go on.
>
Wally saw the letter still on the screen at that moment. Curious, he read it. He
>felt his face go beet-red when he read the extremely personal comments to Bruce
from Selina. But the comments that really grabbed his attention were the "Mommy"
>ones directed at Dick. He now knew how his friend must feel.

>"Dick, I'm sorry about the letter. I wish there were something I could do to
help you."
>
Dick shook his head. "That's okay, Wally. Thanks anyway." He looked up. "I guess
>she never really loved us, after all." He shrugged. "Come on. Let's go back to
bed."
>
"Hey, Dick?" Wally began. Dick turned back. "How do you know that she wrote it?
>I mean have you done one of those...whatchacallit...? A handwriting analysis?"

>Dick nodded. "That's why Batman scanned it in. The Batcomputer ran a handwriting
analysis on the letter."
>
"And--?" Wally asked.
>
"The computer says that's Selina's handwriting, all right. An almost ninety-nine
>point nine nine nine chance, in fact."

>"What does that mean?" Wally asked. "Smoking gun?"

>Dick nodded. "More like an eyewitness *saw* you first load the gun and *then*
shoot. It's about as accurate as we can get."

>
"Does it leave her any wiggle room?" Wally asked.
>
"Any what?"
>
"You know, room to maneuver? Any chance that it might not be her handwriting?"
>
"Well, yeah, of course," Dick said exasperatedly. "I mean you can't ever be one

>hundred percent sure with handwriting analysis."

>"Well, that's good, isn't it?" Wally asked. "Maybe with *your* vision powers you
can do the computer one better. I mean, you *are* the Boy of Steel and
>everything. Do you have anything that you could maybe compare it to?"

>Dick looked at Wally as if he'd grown another head. Finally, he nodded. "Yeah, I
do. Wait here a sec." In an eyeblink, Dick rummaged through his bedroom, found
>what he wanted, then returned to the Batcave.

>"Hey, that was *way* longer than just 'a sec,'" Wally protested. Dick grinned.

>"Oh yeah? And I suppose *you* can do better?"

>"I *own* the title, 'Fastest Boy Alive,' remember?" Wally boasted immodestly.
"You may have super-speed, but I'm still faster."

>
"We'll see one day," Dick replied dismissively. "A race around the world. Just
>you'n me, Flasheroo. We'll set the record straight then."

>"You're on, Batboy."

>Dick brought the note that Selina gave him three years ago, "Just because," and
the scanned digital copy of the letter that she'd supposedly left Bruce when she
>was about to skip the country. He also picked up the Batcomputer's readout of
its analysis of the letter. He then brought everything to Batman's lab.
>
With great care, he next began to set up the electron microscope and the special
>alternative light source unit on Batman's lab table.

>"I don't get it, Dick," Wally said. "You already have microscopic vision. What
do you all of this equipment for?"
>
"'Cause I want to do it right the first time, Twinkletoes," Dick said only half-
>listening. "First things first. The note that she gave me three years ago is
written on stationary with the same letterhead as the scanned copy. See? Gotham
>Regency?"

>Wally nodded.

>"And since that's a really expensive hotel, it's possible that it has a special
paper for its stationary. So, we look for grade of paper, any special
>watermarks, that kind of thing. Hmmmm...nothing special here. Let's check the
computer readout...um...same here. Nothing special."

>
"Nothing special, check," Wally said, fascinated.
>
"Next thing we check for is the ink. Did the writer use the cheap stuff in the
>hotel, or did she use something more expensive...? Hey, wait! We have another
sample of the writing. I almost forgot!"
>
Dick quickly scanned the Batcave's files with his X-ray vision until he found
>the Catwoman's files. There he spotted the burglar's calling card, with its
little note of apology to her victims.
>
"Okay, here we go! Check for grade..." he sighed. "Probably can't trace it. Or
>the stuff printed on it. She probably did it herself on a laser-jet printer.
However, the handwritten part. We can check that the same way as the other two
>samples."

>"What are you looking for?" Wally asked.

>"Still checking the ink...Hel-lo! What do we have here?" he asked.

>"What? What?" Wally jumped in.

>"The ink on the note she gave me and the card are identical. Not the standard
American instruments stuff. I'll have to run a further analysis on it. Hold on a
>sec--"

>Taking the alternative light source unit, he ran the handwriting samples through
it. The ALS unit was capable of picking up substances invisible to the human
>eye. Once he had an idea of what he was looking for, Dick then used his own
vision powers to do the same. Therefore, he was checking the samples by two
>means--through Batman's methodical steps, and his own unique manner.

>"What do you see?" Wally finally asked.

>"I'll have to run a chemical analysis to be sure, but I think that the ink is
manufactured in western Europe, probably Germany or France. Nothing really
>exotic about it, it's just not standard American."

>"Oh," Wally shrugged. "What kind of ink was used in the other letter?"

>Dick picked up the Batcomputer's readout. About to shrug and put it away, he
suddenly frowned. "That's funny."
>
"What's funny?"
>
"According to the Batcomputer's analysis, the ink used on the letter is American
>standard. Probably from some cheap writing instrument. My guess would be that
the courtesy ballpoint in the hotel room was probably used to write it."
>
"So?" Wally shrugged. "What's the big deal?"
>
"Maybe nothing," Dick said pensively.
>
Placing all three samples side-by-side, he looked at each carefully with his X-
>ray and microscopic visions. What was he looking for? He remembered that time
three years ago when Bruce had showed him a little bit about handwriting
>analysis. What was it they'd found? That the Catwoman was probably left-handed
because of how she dotted her small-case _i_'s.

>
Carefully placing all three samples on a special drafting table that was backlit
>with a fluorescent light, he studied all three again.

>Finally, grinning broadly, he nodded in satisfaction.

>"The _i_'s have it, as they say."

>****

>Chapter Twenty-four

>"What do you see?" Wally asked curiously.

>"Look." Dick pointed at each of the writing samples. Wally dutifully read each
one through:
>
//Forgive me. I hope my actions didn't cause you undue pain.//

>
//Happy 'Just Because,' Dick! Enclosed are four tickets to this year's Baseball
>All-Stars Game to be held in Gotham Stadium. You are about to make three other
people very happy. Choose them wisely.
Enjoy!--Selina//
>
//Darling Bruce, As you know by now, I'm long gone and in Rio.

Really, darling,
>it's for the best. I just don't see myself as the society matron
type, married
to the world's dumbest billionaire. And as for
being a mother to Dick, I'm
>certain that by now you've determined that I'm hardly the
Mommy-type. Bruce,
darling, you were wonderful in bed, but I've
had better. No hard feelings. Ta!
>Selina/
>
Seeing that Wally had finished reading, Dick next pointed out
the lower case
>_i_'s in each of the samples. "Notice how the _i_'s are dotted here,
here, and
here."
>
He pointed out random words in each of the samples. Each word
had a perfectly
>round dot delicately topping it.

>Unsure what he was supposed to be looking for, Wally nodded and
shrugged. "Okay,
so?" he asked.
>
"Now, look at how these two _i_'s are dotted." Dick pointed at
the word
>'actions' in the first sample and 'Stadium' in the second. "What do
you see?"

>Chin in hand, Wally studied the two words that Dick pointed out.
Finally, his
green eyes widened in recognition. "The dots are
different. They look like
>little comets--with a head and a comet tail!"

>"You know, you're really pretty sharp. I don't care *what* Roy
says."

>Wally blushed scarlet, pleased at the compliment from his
friend.

>"So, my dear Dr. West, what *tale* do you s'pose those little comet
tails are
telling?"
>
Wally grimaced at Dick's bad pun. "Hmmm. I'm not sure, but I'd
guess that maybe
>because they're going in *that* direction--" He pointed 'left' with
his thumb.
"--that the writer is left-handed?"
>
"Is that your final answer?" Dick asked straight-faced. Wally
nodded,
>grinning. "Good deductive reasoning, pal."

>"Thanks, but what about the last note? Doesn't that one have any
clues?"

>"You tell me, Detective West. What do you see? Take your time," Dick
urged.
"Here, use the magnifier." He handed Wally a large
magnifying glass.
>
Wally studied the third sample carefully. "Lots of _i_'s," he
said, sounding
>nervous. He kept looking. "It's kinda funny, Dick. They're all so
perfect, like
the person writing was extra-careful to make sure
that the letters were dotted
>just so."

>"Good observation, Wally," Dick said.

>After several more minutes of close scrutiny, Wally stopped. He bent
closer to
the piece of paper. "Huh," he grunted. "Dick, I'm not
sure, but I *think* I see
>something--"

>"--What do you see?" Dick asked immediately.

>"Well, the _i_ in the signature, 'Selina'...Dick I can't be sure,
but it looks
different."
>
"You're right, Wally," Dick said, helping. "It *is* different.
But the
>difference is so slight that only a really careful eye would've

caught it. Good
work."

>
"But, what of it?" Wally asked. "I don't understand."

>
"Look at the comet tail, as you call it," Dick said. "The other tails went to

>the left, but *this* one goes--"

>"--It goes to the *right*!" Wally yelled.

>"Exactly. This comet tail goes to the right. It's really hard to spot because
the writer was being extra careful to make sure that all of the _i_'s were

>dotted just so. But here, the very last word of the document, his or her hand
must have slipped just a little. Not enough to be spotted by the casual eye, and

>not even by an investigator that isn't really looking for it."

>Dick locked eyes with Wally. "The writer of this last letter was right-handed."
Recalling the day Selina taught him how to throw and catch, he added, "And I

>happen to know that Selina Kyle is a southpaw."

>****

>Falcone awoke with a start. He wasn't alone.

>"No-oo-o. Not again," he groaned. "Look, I *told* you already! I don't *know*
nothing--URK!!" He was grabbed roughly by the neck. Strong fingers like steel

>constricted his Adam's apple, cutting off his oxygen supply.

"~URK~!" He gagged.

>"You're going to talk Falcone," a menacing voice growled less than an inch from
his face. "You're going to talk, or you're never going to talk again. Do I make

>myself clear?"

>Falcone nodded nervously, his forehead beaded in sweat. He thought he was going
to pass out from lack of air, when his dark assailant finally loosened his

>powerful grip.

>"Talk, Falcone," Batman growled. "What does Jake McCabe have to do with Selina
Kyle? Why did you hire a lawyer to defend her? And who's after her?"

>
He threw out the last question without thinking.

>
"Uh, uh, Jake McCabe's *dead*! He was killed several years ago by the Feds. You

>can check it out--!"

>"Try again, Falcone," Batman hissed, tightening his grip. "Before I run out of
patience."

>
"~URK~! Pl-Please...I--can't--breathe--!"

>
Batman loosened his hold slightly. "*Talk*!"

>
"Okay, okay!" Falcone whined. "McCabe showed up about three years ago. He'd been

>hired by an outside agency to snatch the Wayne kid."

>"What?" The news took Batman by surprise. Dick? It was Dick they were after?
"Who sent him? Who?"

>
Falcone swallowed, and then added hurriedly. "Some dame named Talia something or

>other! I swear--that's all I know!"

>"What did Selina Kyle have to do with this?"

>"McCabe recommended her to Talia's people. Said he knew her father--the best in
the business before he died. He also said that the Kyle dame had been mixed up

>in something *big* somewhere in Russia. She needed to get out of the country--
fast--and wouldn't ask too many questions if she was approached right."

>
"Go *on*!"
>
Falcone swallowed several more times. "By the time I took the contract to assist
>the Kyle dame on this end, she'd already been broken out of some Russian gulag
in Siberia. She arrived a few weeks later."

>
"Who is 'Talía'?" Batman demanded. "What's her connection to this?"
>
Falcone blanched. His frightened countenance became even more terrified.
>
"I can't tell you--! Please--! You don't know them...they're demons...straight
>out of Hell!" Tears were suddenly streaming out of his eyes. His face went slack
with fear, spittle dripping down the sides of his mouth.
>
"And where do you think *I* come from?" Batman snarled. "Talk, Falcone. Tell me
>*everything* you know, or I swear you'll see Hell first hand."

>Blubbering in mortal terror, Falcone began to talk.
>****

>"Then, Selina didn't write that letter?" Wally asked.
>Dick shook his head. "She was framed." Dick thought of the years of heartache
that he and Bruce had been put through since her arrest. "I've gotta find Bruce.
>I've gotta make him see that Selina really *does* love us."

>"Let's go," Wally said.
>"Uh-uh, Flasheroo. No can do. This is a family matter. I can't have you tagging
along on this."
>
"But--"
>
"No buts!" Dick insisted. At Wally's hurt look, Dick added, "I'm sorry, buddy. I
>know you just want to help and I appreciate it, but I've gotta handle this by
myself."
>
Wally nodded. "Okay, Robbie, I understand."
>
"Good, 'cause you're gonna have to have a really good explanation for Alfred
>when he finds me gone."
>"What--? But I--!"
>"Don't worry. His bark's worse than his bite. He'll start talking to himself in
big words that you have to look up in the dictionary, but he's okay. Just keep
>your head down and apologize--a lot!"
>"Apologize? But *I* didn't do anything!"
>"Doesn't matter. It'll be your fault...until either me or Bruce gets back. Then
it'll be *our* fault. So, remember--"
>
"--Keep my head down and apologize," Wally finished.
>
"You got it!" Dick suddenly zipped to the uniform vault and in less than
>eyeblick, Wally saw a red, green and gold blur zoom towards the Batcomputer. In
the next instant the supercomputers were being scanned at incredible speeds.
>Images flashed by at rates that the human eye would be unable to follow.

>Suddenly, Robin, the Boy of Steel was hovering in front of Wally. "Thanks, pal.
I owe you." He was gone.
>
Wally stared at the long dark recesses of the Batcave through which his friend
>had disappeared.

>"Hummph. You call *that* fast?"

>****

>The Batmobile roared through the empty streets. They'd framed her. They'd framed
her and he'd allowed them to get away with it. And when she'd come back to ask
for help, he'd thrown her out. Because of his stupid pride.

>And now it was too late. He'd shut too many doors in her face. She'd never
forgive him.

>
Batman slammed his fist on the steering wheel. But did he *want* forgiveness?

>What of her role in all of this? She'd accepted a contract to kidnap Dick. No
matter her desperate circumstances, the fact remained that she'd at first

>intended to carry out her contract.

>Falcone was unable to explain her sudden change of heart. Something about a
"better deal."

>
"What deal?" he wondered aloud. "Bruce Wayne's marriage proposal?" Was it the

>Wayne fortune she wanted after all? He found himself doubting her again.

>"Selina, I don't know what your true intentions were, but I'm going to find
out."

>

>
Robin streaked across the Gotham night sky. He scanned the city below for the

>Batmobile's unique signature. He sighed. Batman was running on stealth mode.
Finding him was going to be a little harder, even for Robin.

>
"Okay, Grayson, what now?" Hesitating momentarily, he headed towards the luxury

>apartments overlooking Robinson Park.

>His super-hearing picked up a cry for help from down below.

Searching, he
quickly spotted them--a gang of thugs surrounding a young couple. Eyes

>narrowing, Robin changed directions.

>****

>Batman hesitated outside her balcony. Was he ready? Could he maintain his
objectivity when he questioned her? He recalled what Falcone had told him about

>her activities in Russia.

>In addition to being master thieves, Selina and her father had also been
superior bunco artists. Apparently, they'd nearly conned a Russian agent into

>transferring close to a billion in rubles to a Swiss bank account in "exchange"
for US nuclear secrets. The ruse was discovered at the last minute, and the

>fatherdaughter confidence team was arrested.

>
Selina's father was shot as a spy, while she was sentenced to life imprisonment

>in a Siberian gulag.

>When her mysterious benefactors offered to break her out in exchange for a
"small favor" she readily accepted.

>
Batman stood uncertainly outside her apartment. And how did that make him feel?

>Knowing that Selina had contracted to put Dick in harm's way? Could *he* ever
forgive *her*? He shook his head.

>
Whatever her reasons, or her desperate circumstances, Batman felt in his heart

>that that was the one thing he could *never* forgive. Straightening

his
shoulders he reached inside his utility belt for a lock pick.

>
Entering with the stealth borne of long practice, Batman crossed the room

>towards the large bed. A sliver of moon broke through the clouds, casting a thin
beam on Selina's supine form. She was bound and gagged, her eyes silently crying

>out a warning.

>Batman immediately dove to the floor.

>In the next instant, he was set upon by several figures covered from head to toe
in black. Batman kicked, punched, and ducked. His assailants' grunts of pain

>told him that he was gaining the upper hand.

>The next instant, he was struck in the abdomen with the force of a truck. He
doubled over in pain, gasping for breath. Before he could recover, he was kicked

>in the head, again with surprising power. Falling on his knees, he could feel
himself blacking out. He weakly struggled to regain his feet.

>
Another powerful blow to his side made him see stars momentarily. Falling on his

>back, he looked up, his vision swimming. A tall, slender figure walked into his
line of sight, a beautiful woman with exotic eyes.

>
"I am sorry, my beloved," she said with sincere regret. She was pointing a small

>pistol at him. "But it is time."

>"Who are you--?" Batman whispered.

>Smiling sadly, she pulled the trigger. Batman's hand automatically went to his
shoulder. With numbing fingers, he was just able to pull out a small dart as he

>blacked out.

>****

>Robin stopped the surprised muggers with ease. Using plastic tie-wraps, he bound
them and called the GCPD to pick them up. The young couple thanked him

>profusely. They were just a few years older than he was.

>"Thanks, Robin," the girl said, kissing him lightly on the cheek. Robin blushed
goofily.

>
"Aw, gee," he said, scuffing his toe on the ground. "It wasn't anything."

>
The boy shook hands with him. "I don't know how to thank you. It was stupid of

>me to take Cindy through the park at night, but we're late getting home. I
promised her dad I'd have her home before one."

>
"Robinson Park *is* pretty dangerous at night," Robin said unnecessarily. "Even

>with the Dynamic Duo patrolling the streets of Gotham. You're just lucky I
happened to be flying over."

>
The two teens looked embarrassed at his mild rebuke. Robin shrugged. "But, hey,"

>he added, "I know all about breaking curfew--Believe me! Grown-ups can be pretty
autocratic sometimes."

>
"Tell us about it," Cindy sighed.

>
"Look, you still have five minutes before you're overdue. How far do you live?"

>Robin asked.

>"Just in those high-rises," Cindy said, pointing in the general

direction that
Robin had been headed. Snatching them both up, Robin took off.

>
"You're in luck," he said, flying them over the treetops.

"That's on my way."

>

>
Selina flexed and released her wrists. It was slow going, but she knew that

>eventually she'd be able to slip out of her bonds. She couldn't believe what
she'd seen. The witch had single-handedly taken out Batman! How was that

>possible?

>The woman stood over Selina, looking down at her with disdain.

>"You are most unworthy of him, thief. Can you not see that now? He is of noble
blood. Destined to be my consort, as he has been in many previous lifetimes."

>She turned to where Batman lay still in the middle of the floor.

>"Ubu, move him so that the boy sees him as soon as he enters. Robin is most
powerful. We must distract him momentarily."

>
Ubu nodded. "Yes, mistress."

>
"But this time," Talia continued, addressing Selina, "my beloved shall not be

>allowed to die. Two hundred and fifty years ago, he fought against my father in
Tibet. He led a faction, which destroyed my father's base. In the aftermath, my

>beloved died in the attempt to destroy the Lazarus Pit that my father had only
recently established there. After three generations passed, I once more felt my

>beloved's presence in this world. This time in Peru."

>She paused, looking at a point above Selina's head.

>"Again, he came into the world only to stop Father from completing his base of
operations in the Andes from whence Father planned to seize ultimate control of

>the world. My beloved's life was forfeited in the great battle that soon
followed."

>
Talia's eyes took on an inner light.

>
"Several more generations went by, before I at last felt his soul once more.

>With each rebirth, thief, he has been drawn to me, like a firefly to a lamp. Our
souls have come ever closer to being united as one.

For it has been written that

>the Dark Knight shall join with the daughter of the demon and spawn a new
generation of super-men."

>
She gazed on Selina with hate-filled eyes.

>
"You and the boy have distracted my beloved from his true calling long enough.

>He is *mine*! And this time round, he shall be unable to resist our destiny.
When he dies, he *will* enter the Lazarus Pit and rise again, to rule by my side

>for all eternity." She laughed suddenly, a fanatical look coming over her. "And
the boy? His DNA will be used to--"

>
The crack of a whip broke the stillness of the night.

>

>
Robin's super-hearing picked up the distinct sound of a whip. Catwoman! He

>zoomed his X-raytelescopic vision into her apartment. Selina was fighting

>against a large group of people.

>"Batman!" he whispered. His dad was lying unconscious on the floor. A determined
look came over Robin. "No body hurts my mom and dad," he muttered.

>

>
"It looks to me like Batman has found you very resistible in the past, witch,"

>Selina snarled, lashing out with her whip. "He obviously doesn't want anything
to *do* with you!" Selina kicked out, spun and lashed out again with her cat-o'-

>nine-tails.

>~CRACK!~

>"Maybe you should the hint," she taunted. "'No' *means* 'no'!"

>"Stop her!" Talia shouted. Her men surrounded Selina, keeping just out of reach
of her whip. "Ubu! My beloved! If she does not surrender in the next instant--

>break his neck!"

>"Yes, mistress," Ubu replied.

>"*No*!" Selina shouted, leaping over the heads of her attackers. She landed--
hard--both feet on the hated woman.

>
"Mistress!" Ubu roared.

>
At that moment, the entire outer wall of the apartment collapsed. When the dust

>cleared, they all saw a small masked figure in red, green, and gold standing in
the center of the opening.

>

>
Chapter Twenty-five

>
"*Ubu*! The boy!" Talia warned. Robin whirled towards the sound of her voice.

>His momentary distraction was all the time the giant Ubu needed. He fired a
large pistol, the room resounding with its sharp report.

>
The next few moments passed in the twinkling of an eye, but seemed an eternity

>to Selina. She leaped towards Robin, crying out at the same time.

"Robin! Look
out--!"

>
Meanwhile, when Robin heard the sound of the shot, he calmly stood his ground.

>In the years since he'd discovered his invulnerability, he'd learned not to
flinch and duck when someone fired upon him. It was always kind of fun to see

>the crooks' faces when their bullets bounced off his chest.

>Too late, he saw that the pistol had not fired a bullet at him, but rather a
long, trailing monofilament that glowed green. As he was about to duck, the

>leading edge of the green line reached him. Robin froze, paralyzed in
excruciating pain--!

>
Flying towards Robin, Selina saw the strangely glowing green line begin to wind

>itself around the Boy of Steel. To her horror, she saw the boy's entire body
shudder in a paroxysm of agony.

>
"ARGHARGHARGHARGH!!!!" Robin screamed. Kryptonite! Going down he valiantly

>struggled against his bonds, but felt himself blacking out. As he fell,
frightening images of a giant and a woman with amethyst eyes came to him. His

>eyes widening in recognition, he addressed Talia. "You..." he whispered weakly.
"It was you..."

>
Alighting next to Robin, Selina desperately started clawing at the fine cable
>that was holding him immobilized.

>He looked up at her, his mind hazy from pain.

>"Selina," he whispered. "...Knew you loved us..." Closing his eyes, his face
contorted in agony. "Hurts..." Blessedly, the boy passed out.
>
Selina saw that Robin's skin was beginning to turn a shade of green. Hot tears
>start streaming down her cheeks.

>"Dick--! Hold on, sweetheart. I'll free you. Please, hold on!"

>"How touching," an ugly, mocking voice said from behind. "The Cat wishes to save
the little bird." Selina suddenly felt something cold on her forehead and froze.
>Tears stinging her eyes, she looked up.

>"Please!" she begged. "You're killing him!"

>"No," Talia said coldly. "At least, not yet." She turned to her henchmen. "Ubu,
you know what to do." Turning to Selina, she smiled kindly. "I see that you love
>them both. *Good*! You shall be there to see them both *die*!"

>Before Selina could react, she heard a light ~pffpft~ and felt herself suddenly
going cold. Drugged! The same as last time!

>
No-oo-ooo! her mind cried.
>

>
He was flying across red-laden skies. Below, the endless white of the dying
>planet stretched from horizon to horizon. The lights of the last city could be
seen up ahead. Even from up here, he could feel the shockwaves that were even
>now tearing the inner core of the homeworld.

>Next to him, the tiny bundle slept soundly. He turned, smiling at his sleeping
son. Little Van sighed in his sleep.
>
He adjusted the video pickup in the aircar.
>
"My son, my sole regret is that I shan't be there when you take your first step
>or say your first word. I pray to Rao, the Creator, that at the end of your
journey, you will find another whom you shall call 'Father'--and who shall call
>you 'Son.'"

>He reached over and lightly traced his son's damask cheek.

>"Soon, I shall join your mother in the House of Rao. Together, she and I will
watch over you and protect you." He looked directly into the video pickup.
>
"You are Van Zee-Two, last scion of the Houses of Zee and El, two houses with a
>long, proud history. Our family has provided many scientists and recognized
leaders to our world, Krypton. Our cousin, Jor-El, is this generation's greatest
>living scientist." He smiled with pride.

>"Men and women such as he have brought our planet to the zenith of
enlightenment." He shook his head and sighed. "But such knowledge has its dark
>side. You are too young yet to fear more than the shadows on your wall. But more
frightening shadows grow within our society with each passing day." He looked
>away momentarily.

>"We have tapped the planet's resources to the point that there is literally
nothing left to retrieve. Whereas once no Kryptonian ever went hungry, or
>suffered from want, today the masses are crying for food, for heat, for basic
needs." He wiped a lone tear that had started trickling down his cheek.
>
"Now, Krypton is dying. The quakes expose us to the green radiation and each day
>hundreds more journey to Rao before their time. The Ruling Council closes its
collective eyes to the problem. The masses grow closer to anarchy each day. To
>protect the innocent from becoming victims of the predators that have been
springing across the great city of Kryptonopolis, I donned the mantle of
>Nightwing." He smiled ruefully.

>"Some call me hero. The Council refers to me by another word." His eyes taking
on a faraway look, he spoke softly. "Because the Nightwing always flies
>alongside the Flamebird, your mother, Kara, became Flamebird before her death.
Together we fought against the forces of ignorance and hatred that threatened to
>destroy the very fabric of Kryptonian culture." He choked on his words.

>"Before Kara journeyed to Rao, she made me promise that you would be given a
chance at life. Now, you and I travel to our cousin's home. I know not if I
>shall convince Jor-El that he should help, but as we are his last living
kinsmen, I believe that he shall honor my request."

>
He smiled sadly. "Farewell, my son. This recording is a poor legacy with which
>to leave you, but it is all I have left to give. Except my love. That you shall
always carry with you, little Van Zee-Two."

>

>
Robin opened his eyes.
>
Where was he? He turned his head slightly, but couldn't focus. Everything was a
>confusing blur of light and sound. He became suddenly aware of the pain.

>"Uhhnnn..." he groaned.

>"Robin!" a soft whisper hissed instantly next to his ear. He felt a light kiss
on his forehead, followed by a soft caress on his cheek.
>
"Selina?" He looked up, Selina swimming in and out of focus. She nodded, a
>tearful smile breaking through.

>"Yes, sweetheart. It's me."

>"Batman?" he asked.

>"He's here, sweetie," Selina reassured him. "He can't come to you right now.
We're in different holding cells. How are you feeling?"
>
"It hurts..." he whimpered softly, ashamed of his weakness. "It hurts so
>much..." Comforting arms enveloped him instantly. He felt himself being rocked
gently to sleep. "Please, make it stop hurting...please..."
>

>
Selina held him closely. The cell was cold and dank. She tried transferring some

>of her own body heat to Robin.

>"How could they do this to you?" Selina whispered fiercely, rocking him back and
forth. Whatever they'd done to him, it was just making him weaker. She began to
>sob.

>"Oh, how could Bruce bring you into this life? You're just a boy! I don't care
how powerful. You're only a little boy!"
>
She buried her face in Dick's dark hair, crying raggedly.

>

>
Selina's sobs echoed in the outer chamber. A pair of amethyst eyes smiled in
>malevolent delight.

>"Soon, my dear," Talia uttered. "Soon, both you and that alien brat will be but
a bad memory. And my beloved and I shall be joined as it was meant to be."
>

>
Light images swam in and out of sight. Luminescent snapshots of his life.
>
Mom and Dad on the trapeze. "Let's go little Robin!"

>
Reaching out to each other as they fall. "John!" "Mary!"

>
Bruce holding him on the way home from the funeral.
"Everything's going to be
>all right, son."

>Bruce standing in the middle of the kitchen with a pancake on his head, while he
and Selina double over in laughter. "Think that's funny?"
>
Selina crouched on the lawn, holding out her fielder's glove.
"Come on, Dick."
>You can do it!"

>Alfred standing calmly, hand on his shoulder, offering quiet support after
Selina's arrest. "Everything's going to be all right, Master Dick."
>
The light dims. The images grow darker.
>
His hand opens the lead-lined box and he experiences searing-white pain for the
>first time in his life.

>He doesn't know where he is. He's cold and then hot. He's too weak to hold his
head up. Voices swell and recede.
>
"Ubu, you know what you must do."
>
"Yes, mistress."
>
He struggles to see, opening his eyes with difficulty. A strange giant of a man
>approaches him, while a beautiful woman with purple eyes glares down at him. He
tries to say 'Hello,' but words fail him.
>
The giant takes out a syringe, and he feels an instant of panic. Something cold
>and sharp pierces his upper arm. This quickly passes. He concentrates on the
woman trying to memorize her features, but his illness has left him too weak.
>
She approaches him, reaching her hand out to him. Her fingers are cool on his
>forehead. She begins to chant, and he soon falls under its soothing spell.

>****

>"Everything's going to be all right, Dick," Selina's soothing voice crooned. "I
promise."
>
Robin tried to but couldn't open his eyes. "Selina?" he croaked

faintly. Selina

>immediately grabbed his hand and held it tightly to her wet cheek. She struggled
to speak, finally getting the words out.

>
"Yes, it's me, sweetheart. How are you feeling?" she asked. "Are you still in

>pain?"

>His face clenched as a sudden spasm violently shook him. He buried his face in
her arms, too sick to be brave. "It hurts so much," he admitted in a little boy

>voice.

>"Oh, honey, I wish I could make the pain go away," Selina said, holding him
closer. "But I don't know what that the witch did to you!"

>
"Kryptonite..." Robin whispered.

>
"What? Krypton-what?" Selina asked. "What's that?"

>
"Kryptonite..." Robin repeated. "...Makes me sick...takes my powers away..."

>
Selina took his face in her hands. "Dick, listen to me, sweetheart. Is *this*

>what made you sick before?" He nodded. "Honey, how were you cured? Please, I
have to know in order to help you."

>
"Sunlight..." Robin whispered. "Need...sunlight..."

>
"Sunlight?" Selina repeated. That didn't make sense. And yet, during his

>recovery period, Dick had been placed outside in the sun as much as possible.
She'd assumed that they'd wanted him to have fresh air, but perhaps it *had*

>been the sun all along.

>If it was sunlight Dick needed, then that's what he was going to get! Looking
around the dank cell, she assessed her chances of breaking out. Above the door

>the stones had been unevenly laid and formed what looked like a thin ledge no
more than three inches in width.

>
She heard the key being turned in the outer lock.

>

>
Sound returned first. Voices, machinery, metal doors opening and slamming shut.

>Next, he felt the cold floor underneath. Dampness seeped through his costume and
left a bone deep chill throughout his entire body.

>
I'm in a cell, he deduced. He slit his eyes open, just enough to get his

>bearings. Not turning his head, he surveyed the area immediately before him:
mortar and stone. Very old. He could hear water dripping from somewhere. The

>walls themselves were covered with a thin veneer of mold and slime.

>Underground dungeon, he thought.

>Taking a chance he rolled onto his back. He was alone. Sitting up, he fought a
momentary wave of vertigo, but this soon passed. He felt around his waist. His

>utility belt was gone.

>Using the wall as leverage, he stood. Eyes narrowed, he immediately started
looking for a means of escape. A little to the right and above the door, he

>noticed that the stones had been unevenly laid. He ran his hands

carefully along
it. The stones formed a very thin ledge here, no more than two-three inches in width.
>Batman heard the keys jangling outside the cell.
>****
>"Guards! Prepare the prisoners" Ubu ordered. "The mistress wishes to see them.
Ensure that the detective and the woman are shackled properly."
>
"Yes, overseer!" The two guards promptly turned to open the doors of the respective prisoners.
>"Arshavir! If the woman does not cooperate," Ubu said coldly. "Kill her!"
>"Yes, overseer!" Arshavir replied.
>"Jirair, the detective must not be harmed. The mistress will be most
displeased."
>
"Yes, overseer!" Jirair replied, his voice betraying his nervousness.
>
Both men opened their doors and waited a split second in the doorway before stepping through the threshold.
>Arshavir heard the sound before a heavy mass suddenly dropped on top of him.
>****
>As soon as her guard walked through the door, Selina let go and crashed down on
top of him. She'd held onto the three-inch ledge over the door with little more than her fingers and toes and lay in wait for her jailers.
>Arshavir cried out in surprise as Selina slammed into him. "Overseer!"
>Selina's momentum caused them both to tumble in a heap on the floor. Selina
recovered first. Kicking out with all the force she could muster, she struck him
on the temple, instantly knocking him out.
>Alerted by Arshavir's cry, Ubu immediately ran in. Seeing the guard lying
unconscious on the floor, the human giant turned towards Selina and assumed a defensive stance. Although he was a huge man, there was nothing awkward about
Ubu. His movements rivaled Selina's in their feline grace. Giving the impression of a tiger on the prowl, Ubu advanced methodically.
>He soon had her cornered.
>As Ubu got closer, Selina's growing sense of desperation escalated. Dick needed
her!
>
She fainted left and slipped out from under Ubu's grasp. Enraged, Ubu took a flying leap after her. Catching her in his strong grip, he held her firmly as
she struggled uselessly to escape.
>
"Let me go, you zombie!" Selina shouted. In response, Ubu tightened his hold on her.
>"You are unimportant, thief," Ubu uttered, squeezing harder. "The mistress will
not be angered by your death. And I have not had the *pleasure* of killing anyone today." As he spoke, Ubu's arms clamped down with ever increasing
pressure.
>
Selina couldn't breathe. She felt as if her lungs were being squeezed out of her chest. He was crushing her to death! A black maw opened up in front

of her,
threatening to swallow her whole. Her struggles slowed, growing feebler with
>each passing moment. She thought of Dick and of Bruce. They needed her and she'd
failed them.
>
"I'm sorry," she whispered, succumbing to the descending darkness.
>
Tiring of the game, Ubu decided that it was time to end it. The mistress would
>not wish to be kept waiting from her audience with the detective.

>About to give Selina the deathblow, Ubu was unexpectedly struck from behind by a
moving freight train!
>

>
Batman dropped from the thin ledge above the door and easily subdued his jailer.
>He then dashed towards the cell where Selina and Robin were being held. Seeing
her go down, he went airborne and slammed feet first into her attacker.
>
All three went down in a jumble, Selina apparently unconscious. Batman instantly
>rolled over and regaining his feet took up a wary defensive stance. He and his
giant opponent circled each other, neither daring take his eyes off his
>dangerous opponent.

>****

>Selina opened her eyes and focused groggily on the battle going on above her.
Turning her head, she saw Robin still lying in a small huddle on the floor. She
>had to get him to sunlight! Moving with excruciating slowness, Selina began
crawling towards the Boy of Steel.
>

>
Ubu charged Batman, determined to end the altercation by the quickest means
>possible. He had to take the Dark Knight without injuring him too badly;
otherwise, his mistress would take out her wrath on him.

>
Remembering the last time she'd thrown a tantrum, Ubu shuddered in fear.
>
Batman grabbed Ubu by the wrist and forearm, spun underneath him, and using the
>giant's own forward momentum threw him against the wall.

>Ubu struck his head on the stonewalls with a resounding ~crack~. His eyes
rolling upwards, Ubu slowly slid down the wall to a sitting position on the
>floor.

>****

>Gently raising Robin to a sitting position, Selina somehow managed to throw him
over her shoulder in a fireman's carry. Moving towards the door, she almost
>collapsed under his weight. Leaning against the wall for added support, Selina
set her jaw in a straight line and placed one foot in front of the other.
>
Walking out into the corridor, she saw that there was only one way out. Taking a
>look back, she saw Batman and Ubu in a deadly struggle. A warning bell jangled
inside her head. She had to get Dick to safety. But how could she abandon Bruce?
>
Dick and Bruce, the two men she loved, needed her. But Dick was still a child,
>and in Selina's heart, he had become her child. His safety was her

responsibility. Bruce would understand.
>
About to leave, she saw Batman slam Ubu against the wall. The giant slid to the
>floor, unconscious. It was over. Smiling in relief, Selina waited for Batman--
no, she waited for Bruce.
>
Gasping raggedly, Batman stared long and hard at her. His insides were torn by
>conflicting emotions. Seeing her almost killed by Ubu had sent him into a wild
frenzy of fear mixed with rage. Seeing her standing there, impossibly beautiful
>despite their filthy circumstances, he felt his heart catch in his throat.

>He wanted to take her in his arms. But seeing Robin so impossibly still, his
heart almost stopped in fear.
>
"Robin?" he whispered. He hurried to them, and Selina gently turned the boy over
>to his father.

>"He's in terrible pain, Bruce. Something about Kryptonite--?"

>"Bruce--?" Batman looked at her in surprise. She nodded.

>"I've known almost from the beginning--" Seeing movement behind Batman, Selina
suddenly pushed him out of the way. Hissing, she leaped and kicked out.
>
Ubu! He'd regained consciousness and was trying to stop them. With Batman
>looking on with open admiration, Selina lithely spun in midair, kicked out once
more, and connected with the giant's abdomen. Still groggy from the earlier blow
>to the head, Ubu bent over, the wind knocked out of him.

>Landing gracefully in front of him, Selina waited for Ubu to look up.

>"*This* is for Robin!" She kicked out, striking him on the chin. Ubu staggered
back, but didn't fall. Selina spun in fury, and kicking out, snarled, "*This* is
>for Batman!" Ubu again took a few steps backward, but remained on his feet,
stunned.
>
"And *this*--" Selina took a flying leap and cart-wheeling in midair, she caught
>him with two solid blows to the head. "--is for *me*!"

>Ubu fell straight back, a giant tree meeting its end. Selina stood over him, her
pulse pounding in her ears, her breathing in quick, short gasps. Turning to the
>two men whom she loved more than anything else in the world, Selina just stood
and waited.
>
It was Bruce's move.
>
Robin stirred. "Bruce?" he whispered. Batman immediately looked down at his boy,
>holding him closer. Instantly, Selina was standing next to them, her fingertips
gently brushing Robin's hair back from his forehead.

>
"She loves us, Bruce..." Robin slipped back into unconsciousness.
>
Keeping his eyes on Selina, Batman answered, "I know she does, son."
>
Selina felt the tears flow unchecked. She tentatively reached a hand up to
>Batman's cheek.

>"What I don't know," Batman continued, "is if she'll ever forgive me

for not
believing in her."

>
Unable to speak, Selina nodded. Finding her voice, she began, "I can't blame

>you, Bruce. I've done too many things in my life that I'm ashamed of. The only
good thing that I've ever done is fall in love with you and Dick." She looked

>down at Robin, her face racked by guilt.

>"I was hired to kidnap Dick and deliver him to these monsters. I was in trouble
and I was desperate, but I know that doesn't excuse what I almost did." Locking

>eyes with Batman she spoke softly.

>"But when I met Bruce Wayne, I fell in love with him...and his son." Selina's
voice caught. "I just couldn't go through with it.

Everything that happened was

>my fault, not yours."

>Batman shook his head. "No, not everything, Selina--" he looked down at Robin.
"--but this isn't the time or the place. When we get out of here--and I swear to

>you that we will get out--we'll talk. Until then..." He bent down and Selina
willingly kissed him softly, tenderly, a promise of love and forgiveness.

>

>
Chapter Twenty-six

>
Wally kept his eyes carefully downcast. Alfred was methodically preparing

>breakfast. The dignified butler hadn't spoken a word since he discovered Dick's
absence. Wally felt uncomfortably guilty over the entire episode and was growing

>increasingly worried.

>Dick should've been back by now. All he was supposed to do was

talk to Bruce.
Show him the proof that Selina had been framed.

>
Something must've gone wrong.

>
"Alfred?" he asked tentatively. Alfred looked up.

>
"Yes, Master Wallace?"

>
Master Wallace. Alfred only called him that when he was in trouble. The same

>with Dick. He was 'Master Richard' whenever he pulled a particular boner. Wally
grimaced.

>
"I'm really sorry, sir," he apologized, though what he'd done wrong was beyond

>him. Like Dick had warned him. It was *his* fault, until either Dick or Bruce
returned. Then it would be *their* fault. He sighed. He'd never understand

>grownups.

>"No need to apologize, young sir," Alfred said, returning to the task at hand.
"I am quite certain that Master Richard left under his own power."

>
"Yes, sir," Wally said. "I'm sorry, sir." He looked down at the empty place

>setting in front of him. His worry getting the better of him, he spoke again.
"Alfred?"

>
Alfred looked up again. His blank English butler's expression gave nothing away,

>yet he somehow exuded 'attitude' nonetheless. He raised a single eyebrow. Wally
had the sudden feeling he'd just been chewed out without a word being spoken. He

>swallowed nervously.

>"Alfred, I'm getting really worried," he said in a small voice. "May I go look
for them?"

>
Alfred's expression didn't change, although Wally thought he caught a brief
>flash of surprise in his eyes.

>"And why, Master Wallace, are you asking *my* permission to conduct a search?"

>Wally's normally pale cheeks reddened, matching the color of his hair. "Because-
-" His voice squeaked. Swallowing, he tried again. "Because, I gave my word,
>sir. I promised Uncle Barry that I'd do whatever you and Mr. Wayne told me to.
A-And 'cause I promised Dick I wouldn't follow him." He dropped his eyes again.
>Inexplicably feeling the urge to start crying, he looked beseechingly at Alfred.

>"Please, sir. I'm *really* worried. May I?"

>Alfred stared at the boy for a long moment. The loyal butler was deathly worried
for the two masters. It wasn't like either Master Bruce or Master Dick not to
>call if they were to be held up.

>Something had happened. Something terrible. He was sure of it. He nodded in
agreement.
>
"Very well, Master Wally. I believe that you should--"

>
Before he could finish the sentence, Alfred felt a sudden tornado sweep through
>the kitchen.

>"--go check on Master Dick."

>As these words left his lips, a second whirlwind swept into the kitchen toppling
anything that was not bolted down. Alfred had to duck against the flying debris,
>covering his eyes from the sudden dust that was kicked up. Within an eyeblink,
everything was back in order.
>
When his vision cleared, Alfred saw Kid Flash standing before him.
>
"They're in trouble," the junior speedster reported.
>

>
Carrying Robin, Batman raced down the dark, labyrinthine tunnels. Selina
>followed closely at his heels.

>"Where are we going?" Selina gasped. She was holding her sides as she ran. Ubu's
deadly embrace might have broken a couple of her ribs. As she spoke, they came
>to a large natural cavern. They immediately spotted another tunnel entrance
further ahead and started running towards it.

>
They didn't get twenty feet.
>
The cavern was suddenly flooded with huge magnesium stadium lights. All around
>them stood armed guards dressed in black.

>****

>Batman yanked uselessly at his shackles--again. He was chained, immobilized, to
a pole. He'd been stripped of his cape and cowl, as well as his gauntlets and
>boots. Apparently, his jailers were no longer taking any chances that he might
have hidden weapons.
>
Selina was likewise restrained a few feet further down. Robin was tossing
>restlessly on a hospital gurney, his face grimaced in anguish. His complexion
was cast in a faint veneer of green overlaid with a fine sheen of perspiration.
>His breathing was labored and rapid.

>Even unconscious, the boy was suffering.

>Batman clenched his jaw, a muscle throbbing on his temple the only sign that he
suffered along with Robin.
>
He felt a slight, cool breeze on his cheek and smelled fresh air. He looked
>around trying to discern its possible origin. Try as he might, he couldn't see
anything past the magnesium lights. Everything beyond the circle of illumination
>was in deep shadow.

>"Bruce, we have to do something!" Selina sobbed. "Dick looks worse than before!"

>Batman shook his head. "I know."

>A tall, stately gentleman dressed in long, flowing robes stepped forward. He had
piercing black eyes that sent a chill down Batman's spine. The man oozed danger.
>
"So, Detective," he said in a quiet, basso voice. "We meet at last."
>
"You have me at a disadvantage," Batman said wryly.
>
A brief flicker of amusement passed across the newcomer's eyes.

>
"Who are you and what do you want?" Batman asked bluntly.

>
"Straight to the point. I approve. I am Ra's al Ghul and I am destined to one
>day rule the world."

>"Oh, really?" Selina piped in. "Was there a vote taken? I mean, how does one get
to be 'destined to rule the world'?"
>
Ghul ignored her outburst. Instead, he walked over to where Robin lay restively.
>
"So young, so brave." He laid his hand almost tenderly on the boy's forehead. A
>vague expression of remorse registered briefly on his face. "So sad that he must
die in order to save the world." He turned to them. "But it is a small enough
>sacrifice."

>"What do you mean by that?" Selina demanded. "What did you do to him, you
vampire?"
>
"What was necessary," Ghul replied.
>
"How can it be deemed 'necessary' to hurt a child?" she cried. "What kind of
>monsters *are* you?"

>A new voice answered. "The kind of 'monsters' that are willing to sacrifice in
order to achieve the greater good." Talia stepped into the circle of light.
>
"*You*!" Selina hissed. "If that boy dies, witch, there won't be a rock you can
>crawl under. I'll find you! And when I do I'll--"

>"You'll what, thief?" Talia mocked. "Did I not mention that your death was
preordained? The boy shall not die--yet. My beloved..." She walked up to Batman,
>cast a disdainful look at Selina, and kissed him fully on the lips.

>Repulsed by her, Batman struggled to fight her off despite his restraints.
Finally, he struck out with a reckless move. He butted his head against hers.
>Talia fell back, momentarily stunned. Her father caught her before she hit the
floor.
>
Selina broke into helpless giggles. "Good one, Batman!" she gasped. "That oughta
>show her that a gentleman likes to be asked."

>Recovering, Talia walked up to the bound prisoners. In a rage, she leaped
straight up and kicked out, striking Batman savagely on the temple.
>
Batman felt his head explode in a shower of red and black sparks. Blinking to
>clear his vision, he saw three Talias advancing towards him. She was smiling
malevolently, yet tenderly.
>
She caressed his cheek. "Beloved, I forgive you your actions, because you do not
>understand." Batman jerked his head away from her touch.

>She smiled in amusement, but didn't reach for him again. "You do not understand,
because you do not remember your past lives."

>
"Past lives?" Batman asked sardonically.
>
Talia gave a single nod. "In each of your previous incarnations you've fought
>against my father. But do not worry. This time, when you die, you shall be
placed in the Lazarus Pit." Her eyes locked on his, she approached him
>cautiously, her hand reaching out for him.

>"Once you have risen, all you will remember is my love for you. And you will
rule as my consort for all eternity." She raised herself on her tiptoes and
>kissed him gently on the lips.

>Batman again jerked his head away from her touch.

>"Oh, get a job, lady," Selina spluttered. "What *is* it with you? Can't get a
man, so you drug and chain mine? What's next? Are you going to club him and drag
>him into your lair?" Selina paused and looked around. "Oh, duh! You've already
done that!"
>
Talia lunged towards Selina, her talons extended. "I *will* silence you, thief!
>But first you'll witness--!"

>"*Enough*!" Ghul roared, interrupting his daughter. "We have much to do. Prepare
the boy. It will be sunup soon. When he is exposed to the sunlight, his
>bloodstream will begin to metabolize the serum--"

>"*What* serum?" Batman demanded.

>Standing shakily from the blow to the head, Talia snapped her fingers. A team of
medical personnel entered the circle of light. They were pushing several carts
>filled with medical instruments and bottles filled with strange liquids.

>Talia extracted a single tube that glowed a fluorescent green from the cart. She
held it up for Selina and Batman to see.

>
"*This* serum," she said. "About three years ago, we hired this traitor--" She
>glanced spitefully at Selina. "--to bring us Richard Grayson. We knew of his
extraordinary powers and wished to control them. Much to our surprise, as our
>plan was about to be set in motion, we received word that the boy was dying from
a mysterious blood ailment." She paused.

>
"To make a long story short, we were puzzled as to what could make the Boy of
>Steel deathly ill and were determined to find out."

>Ghul stepped forward. "I had my daughter extract several blood samples from the
boy while his invulnerability was cancelled."

>
"We'd intended to analyze his DNA as well," Talia added, "but to our surprise,
>we were not able--"

>"Talia!" Ghul said sharply.

>"Really, father," Talia chided, "what difference can it make if they know? In
another few minutes it won't matter either way."

>
Ghul glowered at his daughter, but finally nodded in acquiescence.
>
"So far we have not been able to crack his DNA code," she continued. "It is most
>unusual. But not to worry. We will. Eventually." She nodded at the medical
personnel.
>
They descended on Robin like vultures.
>
As one, Batman and Selina once again fought violently against their bonds.
>
"What are you *doing* to him?" demanded Batman.
>
"What kind of people *are* you?" Selina asked, her voice shrill. "He's just a
>*boy*!"

>"No," Ghul said, walking over to where the medical personnel were connecting
Robin to a variety of tubes and monitoring equipment.

>
"He is much more than a mere boy. He is the single-most powerful being on the
>planet. And as such, he is a danger to my plans. But soon...soon his power will
be mine."
>
"Father!" Talia called. She was listening into a headset. "I'm receiving
>unconfirmed reports of activity outside the compound."

>"What kind of activity?" Ghul demanded. Selina and Batman exchanged hopeful
glances.
>
Talia shook her head. "I am receiving conflicting reports, Father."
>
"Where is Ubu?" Ghul asked. The giant stepped into the light. His battered face
>showed that he'd been on the losing end earlier.

>"Go investigate!" Ghul ordered.

>"Yes, master," Ubu said, bowing out.

>"Father, sunrise in two minutes. Everything is ready." Talia stepped away from
the gurney.
>
Robin was connected to several tubes that ran ominously to a bank of electronic
>equipment. A heartlung machine assisted his labored breathing. The steady
>rhythm of his heartbeat beeped in the background.

>Ghul walked up to his daughter. "Syringe?" he asked, holding out his hand. Talia
held out a small silver tray. She pulled back a cloth, uncovering a hypodermic
>filled with the same glowing, green liquid that she'd shown earlier.

>Selina gasped. "What *is* it?" she asked fearfully.

>"As we said earlier," Ghul explained calmly as he removed the syringe, "we
extracted several blood samples from the boy three years ago. In the ensuing
>time, even though we weren't able to analyze his DNA, we were nevertheless able
to duplicate the poison." He smiled, a cold smile that chilled his captive
>audience.

>"After we successfully duplicated the poison, we were able to

manufacture a
strain that was five times as powerful. We injected the boy with a weakened
>strain of the original. Not enough to kill, just enough to--"

>"--Just to *torture* him!" hissed Selina.

>Ghul's smile temporarily disappeared. "Naturally, that side-effect is
unfortunate. But I assure you that it is quite necessary. The boy's blood is
>even now building anti-bodies against the poison. When exposed to sunlight, his
system will metabolize the serum, thus building even stronger antigens against
>the blood poison. As he builds his immunity, I shall inject him with a strain
that's five times as powerful. The additional poison will force his metabolism
>to work even harder and produce antigens that are even *more* potent."

>"I don't understand," Batman said. "Why would you want--?"

>Ghul looked like a teacher addressing a very dense student.

>"When the boy builds an immunity to the radiation poisoning, then *nothing* will
be able to hurt him. But--" He turned and walked towards Robin, holding the
>syringe at ready. "--he will never be allowed to enjoy the fruits of his
suffering. For as the sunlight filters down through the ceiling skylights and
>touches him, my people will drain all of his blood, even as it metabolizes the
serum."
>
His words were met with gasps of outrage and horror from Batman and Selina,
>their desperate struggles against their bonds tripled.

>"You *can't*!" Selina cried, tears of frustration streaming down her cheeks.
"*Please*! I *beg* you! You *can't*!"
>
Talía looked at her with mock pity. "Oh, but we can, my dear. And we *are*!" She
>turned to Batman. His naked hatred was almost a physical blow. "I am sorry to
cause you such grief, beloved. But I promise. You will soon forget this. All you
>will remember is my love for you."

>"*Never*!" Batman vowed. "I swear, whatever happens to me, Robin *will* have
vengeance."
>
"Daughter!" Ghul said sharply. "It is time!"
>
"I *still* don't understand!" Batman called in a desperate bid for time. "You
>said it yourself, Ghul--Robin's blood-type is unique! It's incompatible with
yours. What *good* will it do you?"
>
Ghul looked up from his evil ministrations and smiled. Batman again felt a cold
>chill zoom up and down his back.

>"Good, Detective?" he asked. "Why it will probably kill me. Correct, daughter?"

>Talía smiled up at her father. "As you say, Father."

>Batman looked at them with obvious incomprehension.

>"Detective, I find your concern for me deeply touching," Ghul said sardonically.
"But I assure you that your concern is misplaced. As soon as I die from the
>boy's blood, Talía will submerge me in the Lazarus Pit. And when I rise--"

>"--When Father rises, he *will* be born anew," Talía broke in. "But

this time,
he will have the boy's blood flowing in his veins."

>
"As well as, the boy's powers!" Ghul finished.

>
"You're mad!" Batman retorted. "You can't transfer his powers like that. It's

>medically and scientifically impossible!"

>"Ah, Detective," Ghul replied, "you disappoint me. Whoever said that we are
dealing with the mere laws of science? The Lazarus Pit operates under much more

>arcane laws. Some would even call it 'magic.'" He smiled at Batman's look of
utter disbelief.

>
"Ah, a skeptic, I see," he observed. "No matter. Soon, I shall make a believer

>of you." He turned back to the lurid task at hand.

>Batman looked up. He could just make out the telltale signs of the night sky
lightening into the promise of dawn. Closing his eyes against the sight of death

>descending in the form of the new day, Batman let his mind go still and began to
concentrate on his bonds.

>

>
Selina watched with growing revulsion. She wanted to tear her eyes away, but

>couldn't. If she didn't witness the horror before her, then she'd feel as if
she'd abandoned Dick when he needed her most.

>
Ghul was bent over Robin, ready to plunge the syringe filled with deadly poison

>into his veins.

>She gasped as the first rays of sunlight struck her eyes. Blinking rapidly, she
tried to see through her tears.

>
"*NO-000-00*!!!"

>

>
Batman worked steadily at his bonds, flexing and relaxing his wrists. The only

>hope left was to break free. Now! He began applying steady pressure on the wrist
shackles, concentrating on contracting and expanding his wrists and forearms.

>
He could feel the veins on his neck popping, perspiration streaming down his

>face at the tremendous exertion he was putting forth. This had to work. It *had*
to.

>
A sudden warmth began to spread across his body. Simultaneously he heard Selina

>scream.

>Sunlight!

>Time had just run out.

>With one last desperate effort, Batman strained at his bonds and broke free.

>****

>They were everywhere! Children! Mere children. Dressed in clothing that reminded
Ubu of their elder mentors--

>
A boy dressed almost entirely in red, shot an *arrow* (!?) at the satcom

>antenna. Ubu watched as the arrow flew true and in an amazing display of
pyrotechnics exploded on impact. The boy had destroyed not just their primary

>satellite uplink, but their first line of defense as well.

>"Good work, Speedy!"

>Ubu looked up at the sound of the young, female voice. A beautiful child of no
more than thirteen years flew over the young archer and waved. The boy waved
>back.

>"That's nothing, Wonder Doll!" he called. "You should see me do it with my back
turned and my eyes closed!" But the girl was no longer listening. She'd turned
>at the sound of heavy machinery moving towards them.

>Eyes narrowing, she flew at the armored personnel carrier. The vehicle's turret
rapidly adjusted its large caliber gun tube until it was aimed directly at her.
>To Ubu's surprise, rather than retreating, the pony-tailed girl child hovered,
calmly waiting.
>
With an earsplitting roar, the gun fired and in less than an eyeblink, the
>armor-piercing shell struck its small, frail target. As the smoke cleared, Ubu
was stunned to see the girl still hovering in the same location.
>
"Now it's *my* turn!" she said, a dangerous glint in her eyes. She dived towards
>the hastily retreating tank, and with one well-placed punch, disabled it. The
crew abandoned ship in several different directions. Twirling a golden lasso,
>she was about to throw it to roundup the fugitives, when a red and gold blur
suddenly appeared in front of her.
>
"No *time*, Wonder Girl! We've found the green radiation trail again. It goes
>into the side of the mountain--it's probably a camouflaged entrance. I'm gonna
scout it out by vibrating through it. Aqualad's already waiting over there."
>
"We're right behind you, Flasheroo!" the young archer called. The flying girl
>swooped down and lifted the boy. "Now *this* is what *I* call 'Flying the
friendly skies'!" he quipped.
>
The girl laughed, a clear musical sound like that of wind chimes.
>
Ubu faded into the shadows and hurried back to the underground complex by a
>different route. If he were to save the Master and Mistress, then he had to act
quickly.
>

>
Like an avenging angel, Batman leaped across the short space separating him from
>the huddle of medical personnel. His momentum carried him almost within arms
reach of Ghul. The others fell all around him, knocking over surgical
>instruments and monitoring equipment.

>Ghul backed away from Robin. "*Stop him*, you fools!" he ordered sharply, waving
his arms for added emphasis.
>
Never taking his burning eyes off Ghul, Batman battled his way towards the
>would-be world leader, fending off his minions by instinct. Batman witnessed the
fight through a red haze. Ghul's followers were as nothing to him. He wanted
>Ghul.

>"*Batman*! Behind you!" Selina cried in warning.

>Batman instantly whirled and ducked. He swept his legs out in a scissors kick,
knocking his opponent down. It was Talia. She retaliated in kind, striking with
>a force that took Batman by surprise.

>"Father! Hurry!" she urged. "I'll keep him occupied!"

>Ghul nodded and immediately rushed to Robin's side.

>"*Batman*!" Selina called. "He's injecting Robin with the
poison!"

>At her words, Batman went into super-overdrive. With a rage fueled
by
desperation, he held nothing back. Pounding the young woman
who professed to

>love him, but who was willing to cold-bloodedly murder his son,
Batman struck
out with an energy he normally reserved for his
practice dummies.

>
He slammed the lower palm of his right hand into her chin and
followed through

>with an elbow to the temple and a straight kick to the solar plexus.
As his
dazed opponent staggered before him, Batman grabbed her by
the collar and was

>about to deliver the final blow, when he stopped.

>She was looking up at him, her expression serene and accepting.

"Beloved..." she
whispered. "Perhaps, the next time we meet--"
She fell unconscious.

>
Releasing her, Batman whirled towards Ghul who was even now
turning on the

>machines whose dire purpose was to drain the Boy of Steel of his
life's blood.
Without looking back towards the fallen Talia,
Batman vaulted over several

>obstacles that stood between him and Ghul.

>To Batman's horror, the bright sunlight that now bathed Robin in its
life-giving
embrace clearly exposed the first faint signs of red
liquid as it began to pump

>out of the boy's veins.

>"*No-oo-o*!" he roared, landing feet first on Ghul. They both
tumbled to the
floor together. Ghul recovered and viciously
kicked out, connecting with the

>back of Batman's head. The Dark Knight went down in a heap, the
world spinning
madly and going black...

>
Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear his mother
calling him.

>"Bruce!" He shook his head and rolled over.

>"Mom?" he whispered. "Five more minutes, please?"

>"*BRUCE*!" His mother's voice was becoming increasingly insistent.
Almost
shrill.

>
"I'm coming, Mom," he promised. "So sleepy..."

>
"The tubes--! Bruce, you have to remove the tubes!"

>
"Tubes?" he asked, not understanding.

>
"Bruce! Dick *needs* you! *BRUCE*!"

>
"Dick?" he whispered. His eyes snapped open. His vision was
assailed by the

>increasingly bright sun that poured down from the high skylights,
'portholes'
carved out of the side of the mountain where they
were located. He painfully

>turned his head.

>Ghul was standing over Dick, his vile machine still relentlessly
doing its job.
How long had he been out, Batman wondered? He had
to move. Gritting his teeth

>against the wave of nausea that washed over him, Batman *willed*
himself to
sidestep the blackness that once again threatened to
enshroud him.

>
Seeing Dick's life steadily dripping out of his veins, Batman
began to crawl

>across the interminable distance that separated them. He had to remain out of
Ghul's peripheral vision. As he pulled himself forward, Batman felt the world
>phase in and out, like a badly tuned television set.

>He felt dissociated from his body, almost floating. The tube filled with red
liquid loomed before him.
>
Almost there.
>
He reached out, his fingers looking oddly misshapen and faraway. He strained for
>it, but it remained just out of his reach.

>The perspiration streamed down his face, trickling off his chin. He willed his
body to gain the additional inch he needed. Looking up, he gaped almost
>mesmerized by the drip...drip...drip...of the red pearls as they oozed into the
tube.
>
"*Bruce*! *Hurry*!" Selina's sharp voice startled him back to reality. Snapping
>out of the fugue he'd fallen into Batman's fingers closed around the tube and
yanked.
>
Batman heard Ghul's surprised cry of outrage. This was immediately followed by a
>second, more powerful kick to the base of his skull. Once again, Batman's head
exploded in a shower of stars and pain.
>
Ghul cried out in triumph.
>
"Soon, Detective, it shall be over. The boy's powers will be mine, and *you*--
>you shall be my beloved daughter's *pet* for all eternity."

>"Oh, I wouldn't bet on *that*!" a young voice said. It was the last thing Batman
heard before he succumbed to the blackness that again descended to claim him.

>

>
Ubu ran down the secret passageways, reviewing his standing orders as he did so.
>Coming to a set of security doors, he placed his palm on an electronic scanner.
The doors opened smoothly.
>
Stepping into the chamber, Ubu hurried to the command console and sat down. He
>flipped switches and pressed buttons. The sounds of powerful engines coming
online rumbled quietly through the bulkheads.
>
Ubu touched a button and a computer monitor and keyboard emerged from the
>console. He typed a few commands and soon had a view of the open cavern. The
Master was facing off against the Dark Knight.

>
The Mistress was lying, unconscious on the floor.

>
"I must rescue them," he muttered and began inputting the necessary commands

>into the computer. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the transporter chamber
start its signature glow.

>

>
Robin flexed his biceps. The straps holding him down split apart. In an instant,

>he was in the air taking in the situation. Warm sunlight bathed him in its life-
giving rays.

>
Seeing Batman on the floor, unmasked and unconscious, and Selina bruised and

>battered, Robin felt a cold, black anger slowly consume him.

>"You hurt them." Robin's low voice shook slightly. His normally

clear, blue eyes
began to burn, mirroring the white-hot rage that was building inside him.

>
Selina heard the cold, frightening quality in the boy's voice and grew

>immediately worried. "Robin, sweetheart...please don't--" she pleaded.

>Ghul's eyes widened. For the first time in an eternity, he knew fear.

>Robin heard Selina's voice somewhere in the shadowy recesses of the darkness
that was enveloping his soul.

>
"He hurt you and Bruce," he said between gritted teeth. "He *deserves* to--"

>
"Robbie!"

>
Robin turned towards the sound of the voice. Kid Flash! And with him were Wonder

>Girl, Speedy and Aqualad! The momentary distraction broke his mounting wrath.
His blazing eyes returned to their normal cool blue.

>
"Robin--!" "Robbie! He's--!" Selina and Wonder Girl cried out simultaneously.

>
Robin whirled back in time to see Ghul disappearing in a sparkling display of

>light. Kid Flash was suddenly there, his hands grabbing for the fading villain,
touching only empty air.

>
A second sparkling display followed in its heels. The unconscious form of Talia

>disappeared from where she lay. Again, Kid Flash was too late.

>Robin looked at his friend in disbelief.

>"I thought you said you were fast."

>Kid Flash looked at him sheepishly. The others gathered around him, slapping his
shoulder, Wonder Girl hugging him.

>
"Look, we don't have time for this. We've gotta search the place for the

>transporter. It's gotta be here somewhere." He did a quick 360-degree scan of
the area with his X-ray vision. "The place is lead-lined. I can't see through

>any of the walls. Let's go!"

>"No, Batboy!" Speedy said, stopping him. "We'll go look for the bad guys. You
take care of your dad and the pretty lady."

>
Robin suddenly remembered Selina and quickly broke away to free her. As soon as

>her bonds were removed she hugged him to her. Pulling back slightly, she cupped
his face in her hands, amazed at his healthy, apricot cheeks and bright blue

>eyes.

>She leaned down and kissed him gently on the forehead. "Thank you, munchkin,"
she whispered. "For believing in me." Robin blushed to the tips of his ears. He

>dropped his eyes in embarrassment, but felt secretly pleased.

>"Bruce!" Selina said sharply. They both turned in time to see Wonder Girl easily
lifting the 200-pound Dark Knight onto the gurney so recently vacated by Robin.

>With a wave, the group of teens broke up into teams and left to search the vast
complex.

>
The next few moments happened quickly. A deep thrumming started vibrating

>throughout the underground multiplex. Soon, the walls and ceiling

were caving in
all around them, the floor heaving unsteadily.

>
"Robin!" Selina screamed pointing up. Robin looked where she pointed. The
>ceiling skylights were coming down on her and Bruce. A feeling of
deja vu
washing over him, Robin flew towards them, pushing them
out of the way...
>
"Van!" Lara's cries echoed in Dick's mind. Dick/Van Zee saw her
horror as the
>skylights crashed down on him. He felt a momentary sadness at never
seeing his
son again, but triumphant that his baby was safe...

>
"Dick!" Selina cried. Dick saw her horror as the skylights came
crashing down on
>him. Remembering the father who'd sacrificed his life for him, Dick
felt a
momentary stab of regret at never having known him, but
seeing that the father
>who'd raised him these past years was safe, he experienced the same
sense of
triumph that Van Zee felt even as he'd died.

>
Robin quickly evacuated the two people whom he loved most in the
world, and
>leaving them at a safe distance from the collapsing mountain, turned
to find his
friends.
>
As the Boy of Steel dove back into the underground complex, a
hidden entrance
>opened and a small, stealth aircraft made its escape.

>****

>Epilogue

>"Dad, are you sure?" Dick asked. "It's not like you're an old man or
anything
like that."
>
Bruce looked at his oldest son and smiled. "Gotham City doesn't
need Batman
>anymore, son. She has new protector now." He slammed the door to the
uniform
vault with a permanent sounding echo.
>
"But, Dad!" Dick looked over at Selina. She was standing to the
side, not
>wanting to interfere in what was essentially Batman and Robin
business. "Mom,
you talk to him!"
>
She smiled tolerantly at her first son. "Sweetheart, how can I
argue against
>something that I agree with? Something that I've prayed for?"

>Dick looked at her in surprise. They were interrupted by the sounds
of a human
dynamo running down the stairs towards them.

>
"Mommy! Daddy!" A five-year-old boy with Bruce's dark looks and
Selina's green
>eyes literally tumbled in. In a blink, he executed five expert
handsprings and a
round off.
>
Smiling, Dick bent down to eye level with his little brother.
"Hey, Tommy, that
>was a perfect ten! Gimme five!" The two brothers slapped hands. Dick
picked him
up.
>
"I wanna see," Tommy said. "Please?"
>
A polite throat being cleared announced that it was time.
"Master Richard, I
>believe that you shall find all is in order."

>"'Master Richard'?" Dick asked, half-joking. "You only call me that

when I'm in
serious dog-doo with you, Alfred."

>
Alfred rolled his eyes. "As you have reached your eighteenth birthday, young

>sir, and surprised both your parents and myself by somehow graduating from high
school with highest honors, I felt that you'd come of age." He paused.

>"Apparently, I was sorely mistaken."

>He spun on his heel. Bruce and Dick exchanged amused glances. Dick lowered Tommy
to the floor and followed Alfred into the uniform vault.

>
"Why can't I go with him, Daddy?" Tommy asked. Selina walked up to her baby and

>placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

>"One day, munchkin," she whispered reassuringly. She met Bruce's surprised look.
"It's the 'family business,' after all."

>
The door to the uniform vault slowly opened, and Alfred walked out. His most

>urbane expression firmly in place, he stepped to the side and waited.

>A minute passed.

>Tommy began to fidget restlessly. Catching sight of someone standing in the
doorway, he gasped suddenly.

>
A figure in black stood before them, hidden by the shadows surrounding him.

>Stepping out into the light, he looked momentarily uncomfortable at being the
center of attention.

>
Unlike his mentor, Dick opted to forego a cape and cowl, preferring the feel of

>the wind on his hair and face.

>The others studied the new, darker look. Gone were the bright red, gold, and
green of Robin. Before them stood a young man who'd come into his own. But he

>nonetheless chose to honor those who'd come before him with subtle touches in
his new uniform.

>
A bat-like mask honored the man he called 'Dad' today, while a midnight blue

>stylized wing that ran across his chest honored the father who'd given him life.
The sleek, aerodynamic bodysuit--the envy of any acrobat--honored the memory of

>the first man he'd called 'Daddy.'

>And unlike his mentor whose hallmark was instilling fear into the hearts of the
criminals against whom he'd fought relentlessly, this hero broke into a wide,

>ear-to-ear grin. "So? Whadaya think?" He twirled and then posed in a strongman
stance.

>
Selina laughed lightly. "I think it's wonderful, Dick. But I'm afraid that you

>may wind up fighting off the girls instead of Gotham's criminals."

>Dick blushed at his mother's comments. "Aw, mom," he protested. Tommy giggled at
his brother's discomfiture, not really understanding it.

>
Bruce walked up to Dick and placed his hand on his shoulder.

>
"I'm proud of you, son," he said. "Now, go out and make Gotham City proud of her

>new protector--Nightwing!"

>The End

>####

> <p><p>

End
file.